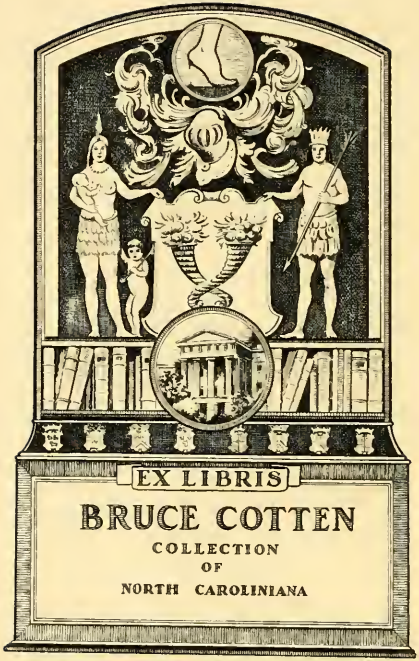
The MASTER OF THE WORLD

JULES VERNE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THE MASTER OF THE WORLD

A TALE OF MYSTERY AND MARVEL

BY

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"THE CLIPPER OF THE CLOUDS," ETC.

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I

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE COUNTRY

THE mountain range parallel to the American Atlantic sea-board, which ploughs through North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania and New York State, bears the double name of Allegheny Mountains and Apalachian Mountains. It is formed of two distinct chains.

Although this mountain system, which is the largest in this part of North America, runs for a length of about nine hundred miles, its average height is not above six thousand feet, and its culminating point is marked by Mount Washington, which rises to a height of six thousand two hundred feet.

This spinal column, if one may so describe it, one end of which slips into the waters of the Alabama and the other into those of the Saint Lawrence, offers no great inducement to the Alpinist to visit it. It cannot have the attraction of the superb summits of the old and the

new worlds, inasmuch as its upper edge is not set in profile in the high zones of the atmosphere. Nevertheless, there was one point in this chain, known as the Great Eyry, which tourists had not succeeded in attaining and which had every appearance of being inaccessible.

Moreover, although this Great Eyry had been neglected hitherto by the mountain-climber, the time was at hand when it was to excite the attention, and even the anxiety of the public for some very particular reasons which I must set forth at the outset of this story.

If I appear in person upon the stage, it is because I was very intimately involved, as will be seen, in one of the most amazing events of which this twentieth century can possibly be the witness. Sometimes I even ask myself if it actually happened, as my memory—perhaps it would be more accurate to say, my imagination—recalls it. But in my capacity of chief inspector of the Washington police, and urged, further, by that instinct of curiosity which is developed in me to an excessive degree, and having for the last fifteen years taken part in so many diverse affairs, frequently being entrusted with secret missions, it is not surprising that my chiefs should have launched me into this fantastic and impossible adventure, in the

course of which I was to find myself at grips with impenetrable mysteries. The only thing is that at the very beginning of this story it is absolutely necessary that my word should be believed. In support of these most marvellous facts I can adduce no other evidence than my own. If you don't want to believe me, very well: you won't believe me.

The Great Eyry is situated precisely upon a point in this picturesque chain, the Blue Ridge, which is outlined on the western side of North Carolina. Its rounded form can be seen distinctly as one leaves the little market town of Morganton, built on the banks of the Sarawba river, and better still from the village of Mount Pleasant, which is a few miles nearer.

What is this Great Eyry, actually? Is there any justification for the name given to it by the inhabitants of the districts in the neighbourhood of this Blue Ridge region? That these mountains should be so named because of their outline, which assumes a blue tint in certain atmospheric conditions, is perfectly natural and obvious. But does the representation of the Great Eyry as an aerie mean that birds of prey—eagles, vultures, or condors, actually have their refuge there? Is it a habitat particularly chosen by the large

winged creatures of the country? Are they to be seen hovering in clamorous flocks above this haunt, inaccessible to all but them? As a matter of fact, no; they are not more numerous there than on other summits of the Alleghenies. Rather the reverse, indeed, and it has been observed that on some days, on approaching the Great Eyry, these birds appear rather anxious to take flight, and after circling round and round make off in all directions, disturbing the whole space with their deafening cries.

Why, then, the name Great Eyry, and would it not have been better to call it a "circus," such as is met with in the mountainous regions of every country? Between the high enclosing walls a broad, deep basin must be hollowed out. . . . And who knows if it does not contain a little lake, a lagoon, fed by the rains and winter snows, such as exists in many places in the chain of the Alleghenies at various altitudes, just as they exist in various mountain systems of the old and the new continents? . . . And ought it not henceforward to appear under that name?

Finally, to exhaust the list of hypotheses, was there not the crater of a volcano there, and was this volcano wrapped in a long sleep from which it would be roused one day by its

internal energy? Was there any reason for fearing in its proximity all the violence of Krakatoa and the fury of Mont Pelée? . . . In the hypothesis of a lagoon, was there not room for fear that its waters, penetrating into the bowels of the earth and turned to vapour by the central heat, might threaten the plains of Carolina with an eruption equal to that of Martinique in 1902? . . .

Now, to be precise, in support of this last eventuality certain symptoms recently observed had disclosed, by the production of steam, some volcanic process in operation. Once, the peasants working in the fields had heard hollow sounds that were inexplicable.

Sheaves of flame had been seen at night.

Fumes emerged from the interior of the Great Eyry, and when the wind had beaten them down towards the east they left trails of ashes or soot upon the ground. And lastly, in mid-darkness, these wan flames, reflected by the low-lying clouds, had spread a sinister light over the district.

In the presence of these strange phenomena, it is not surprising that the countryside gave itself up to serious anxiety. And to this anxiety was added imperative need to know what the facts were. The Carolina newspapers were for ever dwelling upon what they

called "The Great Eyry Mystery." They asked whether it was not dangerous to remain in such a neighbourhood. Their articles excited both curiosity and nervousness—curiosity on the part of those who, running no risk, were interested in natural phenomena, and nervousness on the part of those who were in danger of being among the victims if these phenomena were a menace to the surrounding country. For the most part, these were the inhabitants of the small market towns of Pleasant Garden and Morganton, and of the villages or mere farms which were fairly numerous at the foot of the chain.

Certainly it was a pity that mountain-climbers had not tried hitherto to penetrate into the Great Eyry. The framework of rocks with which it was surrounded had never been broken through, and offered perhaps no breach through which access to the interior might have been gained.

But was not the Great Eyry dominated by some eminence not far away, some cone or peak, whence the eye might scan its whole extent? No, and within a radius of several miles its altitude was not exceeded. Mount Wellington, one of the loftiest in the whole Allegheny mountain system, reared its crest at too great a distance.

Nevertheless, a thorough survey of this Great Eyry was now imperative. In the interests of the whole region it was necessary to know whether or not it contained a crater, and whether a volcanic eruption threatened this western district of Carolina. So it was decided that an attempt should be made to reach it and to ascertain the cause of the phenomena that had been observed.

Now before this attempt, the serious difficulties attending which were quite understood, one opportunity presented itself, which would undoubtedly permit a survey of the interior disposition of the Great Eyry to be made without the necessity of making an ascent of it.

In the first few days of September in this year an air balloon, manned by the aeronaut Wilkes, was to start from Morganton. Taking advantage of a breeze from the east, the balloon would be carried towards the Great Eyry, and there was some chance that it would pass right above it. Then, when he commanded it by some hundreds of feet, Wilkes would examine it through a powerful glass and would take observations of its depths; he would ascertain if the mouth of a volcano opened within its lofty rocks. That was the main question. That once decided

it would be known if the surrounding country had reason to fear an eruption in a future more or less remote.

The ascent was made according to the programme. The wind was medium and steady, the sky was clear. The morning mists had just dispersed beneath the warm rays of the sun. Provided the interior of the Great Eyry were not filled with fog the aeronaut's eye would be able to sweep its whole extent. If any steamy exhalations were escaping from it he would surely detect them. In that case it would have to be acknowledged that a volcano, having the Great Eyry as its crater, existed at this point of the Blue Ridge.

The balloon rose at once to an altitude of fifteen hundred feet and remained motionless for a quarter of an hour. The breeze was imperceptible at that height, although it blew freely at the earth's surface. But—oh! the disappointment!—the balloon did not wait for a new current, but took an easterly direction. It was thus carried away from the range, and there was no hope that it would be carried back again. The inhabitants of the little market town soon saw it disappear and learned later that it had come to earth near Raleigh in North Carolina.

This attempt having failed, it was decided

that another should be made when conditions were better. As a matter of fact, more noises were heard, accompanied by smoky vapours and by wavering lights, which were reflected by the clouds. So it will be understood that the general uneasiness could not be allayed and that the country rested under the threatened terror of volcanic phenomena.

In the first few days of April of that year the apprehensions, which had been more or less vague hitherto, had serious reasons for developing into panic. The newspapers of the region promptly echoed the public terror. The whole district lying between the mountain range and Morganton had cause to fear an imminent upheaval.

During the night of the fourth to the fifth of April, the inhabitants of Pleasant Garden were awakened by a commotion followed by an alarming report. An irrepressible panic followed, the idea being that that portion of the mountain chain had just fallen in. Everybody rushed from their houses, ready to take to flight, all fearing that they would see some immense abyss opening, in which farms and villages, covering an area of ten to fifteen miles, would be swallowed up.

The night was very dark. A ceiling of thick clouds lay heavy over the plain. Even at

mid-day the slope of the Blue Ridge would not have been visible.

In this darkness it was impossible to distinguish anything, impossible to make reply to the cries which rose on every hand. Terrified groups, men, women, children, tried to recognise the practicable roads and pushed forward in wild tumult. Here, there, and everywhere frightened voices were heard:

"It's an earthquake!"

"It's an eruption!"

"Where is it coming from?"

"The Great Eyry!"

And as far as Morganton the news was sped that stones, and lava, and dust, were raining on the country. It might have been pointed out, at the least, that in the case of an eruption, the din and noise would have gone on increasingly. Flames would have appeared on the crest of the mountain chain. The incandescent streams of lava could not have escaped being seen through the darkness. But no one thought of this, and the terrified people declared that their houses had felt the shaking of the earth. It is quite possible that this shaking was caused by the fall of a mass of rock detached from the side of the range.

Everybody waited, a prey to mortal anxiety, ready to take to flight towards Pleasant

Garden or Morganton. An hour went by without fresh incident. A breeze from the west, partially checked behind the long screen of the Apalachians, just made itself felt through the coarse foliage of the conifers massed together in the shallow marsh lands.

So there was no new panic, and everyone prepared to return into his house. It seemed that there was no further cause for fear, and yet everyone found the day very long in coming. That there had been a landslip in the first place, that an enormous mass of rock had been thrown down from the extreme heights of the Great Eyry, seemed to be beyond all doubt. It would be easy to ascertain that definitely at the first glimmer of dawn, by going along the base of the range for a few miles.

But about three o'clock in the morning there was another alarm; flames rose up above the edge of rocks. Reflected by the clouds, they illuminated the atmosphere over a wide expanse. At the same time a crackling sound was heard.

Was it a fire that had broken out spontaneously in the place, and to what cause was it due? Fire from Heaven could not have set it alight . . . No crash of thunder broke the air . . . True, the fire would not

have lacked fuel to feed on. At this altitude the Allegheny range is still wooded, on the Cumberland Mountains and on the Blue Ridge, too. Many trees grow there, cypress and palm trees, and other evergreens. . . .

"An eruption! An eruption!"

The cry echoed on every hand. An eruption! So the Great Eyry was only the crater of a volcano, scooped out in the bowels of the range! Extinct for so many years, so many centuries even, had it just burst into activity again? Would a hail of burning stones, a torrent of volcanic ejections, be added to the flames? . . . Would the lava come rushing down upon them, avalanche or fiery flood, burn everything in its way, destroy towns, villages, and farms, the whole of this vast countryside, indeed, its plains, its fields, its forests, as far as Pleasant Garden and Morganton, and beyond?

This time the panic broke out, and nothing could stay it. The women, dragging their children and mad with terror, poured on to the roads towards the east, to escape most speedily from the scene of these disturbances of the earth. Many men, vacating their houses, made bundles of their most valuable goods, and set free their domestic animals, their horses, cattle, and sheep, which scattered

in terror in every direction. Imagine the confusion of this weltering mass of men and animals, in the middle of a dark night, in the heart of forests exposed to the fires of a volcano, along the edge of marches, whose waters were in danger of overflowing their banks! And did not the very ground threaten to sink from under the feet of the fugitives? Would they have time to save themselves if a sudden eddy of burning lava, uncoiling along the surface of the ground, cut off their road and made flight impossible?

Some few, however, of the principal farmers, more reflective men, held aloof from this panic-stricken mob, whom all their efforts could not restrain.

Reconnoitring about a mile from the range they observed that the brilliance of the flames was diminishing and that, perhaps, they might end in going out altogether. In sober truth it did not appear that the region was threatened with an eruption. Not a single stone had been hurled into space, not a single torrent of lava was streaming down the slopes of the mountain, no rumbling ran through the bowels of the earth. There was no sign of those seismic disturbances which can upheave an entire country in one instant of time.

This observation, then, was made, and accurately made, that the intensity of the fire in the interior of the Great Eyry must diminish. The reflection on the clouds was gradually fading away, and soon the countryside would be plunged into deep darkness until the morning.

The mob of fugitives had stopped at a point where it was beyond the reach of danger. Then they drew near again, and a few villages, a few farms were occupied once more before the first glimmer of the dawn.

About four o'clock, the rim of the Great Eyry showed scarcely a tinge of faint reflection. The fire was dying out, from want of fuel no doubt, and although it was still impossible to determine its cause, it was not unreasonable to hope that it would not flare up again.

In any case, it appeared probable that the Great Eyry had not been the scene of a volcanic display. And so it seemed that the inhabitants in its neighbourhood were not at the mercy of either an eruption or an earthquake.

But about five o'clock in the morning, above the mountain crests still merged in the shadow of night, a strange sound was borne through the atmosphere, a sound of regular breathing,

as it were, attended by a beating of powerful wings. And, had it but been daylight, perhaps the farmers and the villagers might have seen a gigantic bird of prey pass by, some monster of the air, which, after soaring up from the Great Eyry, winged its flight in the direction of the east.

II

AT MORGANTON

On April 27th I arrived at Raleigh, the capital of the State of North Carolina, having left Washington the previous night.

Two days before, the director-general of police had summoned me to his office. My chief was awaiting me with some impatience. The following is a report of the conversation I had with him, which was the cause of my departure:

"John Strock," he began, "are you still the shrewd and devoted officer, who on many occasions has given us proofs of his devotion and shrewdness?"

"Mr. Ward," I replied with a bow, "it is not for me to declare whether I have lost any of my shrewdness or not. But with respect to my devotion I may assert that it remains entirely yours."

"I am quite sure of that," Mr. Ward returned, "and I only ask you this one more particular question: are you still the inquisitive man, eager to penetrate the heart of a mystery whom I have known hitherto?"

"Still, Mr. Ward."

"And this inquisitive instinct has not become impaired by the constant use you have made of it?"

"Not in the least."

"Very well, Strock; now listen to me. You are not without some knowledge of what has occurred in the vicinity of the market town of Morganton?"

"Indeed, Mr. Ward, in my opinion, those phenomena, which at the very least are singular, are highly calculated to excite curiosity, even if one were not as curious as I am."

"That it is singular, even strange, Strock, there cannot be two opinions. But there is reason to inquire whether the phenomena in question constitute a danger for the inhabitants of the district, whether they are the signs of some volcanic eruption or of some earthquake."

"That is to be feared, sir."

"So it would be interesting to know what it all means. It would be well for the people concerned to be warned in time if danger threatens them."

"That is the plain duty of the authorities, sir," I replied. "We must find out what is going on up there."

"Quite so, Strock. But it seems there are grave difficulties in the way. It is said freely in the country that it is impossible to scale

the Great Eyry and visit the interior. Now, has anyone ever tried to do it, and under conditions favourable to success? I don't believe it, and in my opinion an attempt that was made seriously could not fail to have good results."

"Nothing is impossible, Mr. Ward, and no doubt this is only a question of expense."

"Justifiable expense, Strock; and expense must be ignored when it is a matter of reassuring an entire population, or giving it warning to avoid disaster. Besides, is it so absolutely certain that the enclosure within the Great Eyry is as impregnable as people make out? And who knows if a band of desperate criminals have not made their lair in that spot, to which they get access by paths known only to themselves?"

"What, sir? You have a suspicion that criminals——"

"It may be that I am wrong, Strock, and that everything that occurred there was due to natural causes. Well, that is what we want to find out, and the sooner the better."

"May I ask one question, Mr. Ward?"

"Go on, Strock."

"When the Great Eyry has been visited, when we know the origin of these phenomena, if there is a crater there, if an eruption is imminent, shall we be able to stop it?"

"No, Strock. But the inhabitants of the district will have been warned. It will be known what one can depend on in the villages, and the farms won't be taken by surprise. Who knows if some volcano in the Alleghenies is not exposing North Carolina to the same disaster as Martinique under the fires of Mont Pelée? At any rate, it is necessary that this large population should have the chance of safety."

"I prefer to think, Mr. Ward, that the district is not threatened by any such danger."

"I hope so, Strock, and, indeed, it seems unlikely that any volcano exists in this part of the Blue Ridge. The range has no volcanic nature. And yet, if we are to believe the reports that have reached us, flames have been seen escaping from the Great Eyry. Tremblings of the earth, if not actual quaking, have been supposed to have been perceptible as far as the neighbourhood of Pleasant Garden. Is all this real or imaginary? It is well to be sure."

"Nothing could be more prudent, sir, and no time must be lost."

"And so, Strock, we have determined to make an investigation of the Great Eyry. We mean to go into the neighbourhood as soon as possible in order to collect all the information on the spot, to interrogate the inhabitants of

the towns and farms. We have selected an agent in whom we have absolute confidence, and that agent, Strock, is yourself."

"With pleasure, sir," I exclaimed, "and rest assured I will leave nothing undone to give you every satisfaction."

"I am sure of it, Strock, and I may add that the mission is one which ought to be agreeable to you."

"None more so, sir."

"It will give you a capital opportunity to employ and, I hope, to satisfy that especial passion which is the very basis of your temperament."

"Quite so."

"Besides, you will be free to act as circumstances may dictate. With regard to expense, if there should be need to organise an expedition which may be costly, you will have *carte blanche*."

"I will act for the best, sir, and you may rely upon me."

"Now, Strock, allow me to enjoin you to act with the greatest possible discretion when you are collecting information in the neighbourhood. The people are still greatly overexcited. You will have to discount a great deal you are told, and in any case beware of creating another panic."

"That is understood."

"You will carry credentials to the Mayor of Morganton, who will work in concert with you. Once more, be prudent, Strock, and do not enlist anyone to help you in your inquiry unless you absolutely need them. You have often given us proofs of your intelligence and your skill, and this time we have every confidence you will succeed."

"If I do not succeed, Mr. Ward, it will be because I have run up against absolute impossibilities. For, after all, it is conceivable that I may not be able to effect an entry into the Great Eyry, and in that case——"

"In that case we will see what can be done. I say again, we know that by profession and by instinct you are the most inquisitive of men, and here is a splendid opportunity to satisfy your curiosity."

Mr. Ward spoke the truth. I then asked him: "When am I to start?"

"To-morrow."

"To-morrow I shall have left Washington, and the day after to-morrow I shall be at Morganton."

"You will report to me by letter or telegram."

"I will not fail, sir. In taking my leave of you, I thank you again for having selected me to conduct this inquiry into the Great Eyry affair."

How was I to guess what the future had in store for me? I went back at once to my house, where I made my preparations for my departure, and the next day, at dawn, an express train was bearing me towards the capital of North Carolina.

Arriving the same evening at Raleigh, I spent the night there, and in the afternoon of the following day the railway which supplies the western portion of the State set me down at Morganton.

Morganton, properly speaking, is merely an insignificant market town. Built upon broad Jurassic fields particularly rich in coal, it is the scene of mining operations, which are conducted with some activity. There are abundant springs of mineral water, which in the season attract a host of consumers to the district. All round Morganton the agricultural yield is considerable, and the husbandmen make much profit out of the fields of grain between the many marshes, which are overgrown with bog mosses and reeds.

Forests of evergreens are numerous. The one thing lacking to this region is natural gas, that inexhaustible source of power, of light and heat, which is so abundant in most of the valleys of the Alleghenies.

The inhabitants number several thousands,

all seriously threatened by danger if the Great Eyry were the crater of a volcano, if an eruption covered the country with scoria and ashes, if the shocks of an earthquake reached as far as the threshold of Pleasant Garden and Morganton.

The Mayor of Morganton, Mr. Elias Smith, was a man of great stature, energetic, intrepid, enterprising, forty years old at most, with a healthy constitution that set all the doctors in America at defiance, proof against the cold of winter as against the heat of summer, both of which are sometimes excessive in North Carolina. He was a mighty hunter, not only of the furred and feathered game, which swarms upon the plains near the Apalachees, but a mighty slayer of bears and panthers, which are as common in the dense cypress groves as in the depths of the wild gorges of the double chain of the Alleghenies.

Elias Smith, a wealthy landowner, was the possessor of several farms in the neighbourhood of Morganton. He farmed some of them himself. He paid frequent visits to his tenants, and all the time that he did not spend in his country home he spent on hunting trips, to which his sporting instinct drew him irresistibly.

In the afternoon I got someone to take me to Elias Smith's house. He was at home that

day, having been advised by telegram of my coming. I gave him Mr. Ward's letter of introduction, which was my credentials to him, and we soon struck up an acquaintance.

"It is Mr. Ward who has sent you," he said genially; "well, first let us drink to Mr. Ward's very good health!"

And we clinked glasses and drained them in honour of the Inspector-General of Police.

"And now, what is it all about?" Elias Smith inquired.

I than explained to the Mayor of Morganton the reason and the object of my mission to this district of North Carolina. I reminded him of the facts, or rather the phenomena of which the region had lately been the scene. I pointed out to him—and he agreed—how important it was that the inhabitants of this region should be reassured, or at any rate put on their guard. I told him that the authorities were, rightly, much concerned about the state of things, and were anxious to remedy it if it were in their power. Finally, I added that my chief had given me powers to institute a speedy and effectual inquiry into the Great Eyry question. I was to shrink from no difficulty and no expense, it being understood that the Government would accept responsibility for all the costs of my mission.

Elias Smith listened to me without saying a word. As he puffed at his pipe, the attention he was paying to me was unmistakable. Every now and then I saw his face flush and his eyes gleam under their bushy brows. The chief magistrate of Morganton was manifestly uneasy about what was going on at the Great Eyry, and would be as eager as myself to discover the explanation of these phenomena.

When I had finished my communication he remained silent for a few minutes, looking steadfastly at me.

"So," he said, "they want to know, over there in Washington, what the Great Eyry has got inside it?"

"Yes, Mr. Smith."

"And you do, too?"

"I do, indeed."

"So do I, Mr. Strock!"

And if the Mayor of Morganton had been as inquisitive as I was, we should have made a pretty pair.

"You understand," he added, as he shook the ashes out of his pipe, "in my capacity of landowner I am interested in the stories about the Great Eyry, and in my capacity of Mayor I am obliged to devote attention to the condition of the people under my administration."

"A twofold reason, Mr. Smith," I replied, "which must have impelled you to ascertain the cause of phenomena which might cause the upheaval of the entire district. And I have no doubt you have found them as inexplicable as they are alarming to the people in the neighbourhood."

"Inexplicable indeed, Mr. Strock, for, for my own part, I am not inclined to believe that this Great Eyry is a crater, because the Allegheny range is not volcanic at all. There are no traces of ashes, scoria, lava, or any other volcanic matter anywhere, either in the Cumberland gorges or the Blue Ridge valleys. So I do not think that the Morganton district has anything to fear on that score."

"That is really your opinion, Mr. Smith?"

"It is, honestly."

"And yet these shocks which have been felt in the neighbourhood of the range?"

"Ah, yes, the shocks, the shocks!" Mr. Smith echoed, wagging his head. "In the first place, is it certain that there were any shocks? As a matter of fact, at the time of the great outbreak of flame, I was at my Wildon farm, less than a mile from the Great Eyry, and while there certainly was an uproar in the air, I noticed no shocks either on the surface or below the surface of the earth."

"But according to the reports sent to Mr. Ward——"

"Reports drawn up under the influence of panic!" the Mayor declared. "Anyhow, I made no mention of any in mine."

"That is a point. With regard to the flames which overtopped the highest rocks——"

"Oh, the flames, Mr. Strock; that is another matter. I saw them; I saw them with my own eyes, and the clouds threw a reflection of them an immense distance. Moreover, there were audible noises at the crest of the Great Eyry: hissing, like the hissing of a boiler that is being emptied."

"You were an actual witness of that?"

"Yes; my ears were deafened by it."

"Then, in the middle of all this uproar, Mr. Smith, did you not think you detected the flapping of great wings?"

"Yes, I did, Mr. Strock. But what huge bird is there that would have flown through the air, after the fire died out, to make that flapping? What sort of wings had it got? So I am obliged to ask myself whether it was not a trick of my imagination. The Great Eyry a haunt of some monsters of the air! Would they not have been observed long ago hovering over their enormous rocky nest? In real

earnest, there is a mystery about it all which has not been cleared up yet."

"But which we will clear up, Mr. Smith, if you will be so good as to help me."

"Certainly, Mr. Strock, and all the more willingly because it is so necessary to reassure the population of the district."

"Then we will set to work to-morrow."

"To-morrow!"

And with that last word Mr. Smith and I separated. I went back to the hotel, where I had made arrangements for a stay that could be prolonged to meet the needs of the inquiry.

I did not fail to write to Mr. Ward. I reported my arrival at Morganton, and apprised him of the results of my first interview with the Mayor of the little town, and of our determination to leave nothing undone to bring the matter to a satisfactory conclusion as speedily as possible. I pledged myself further to keep him informed of all our efforts, either by letter or telegram, so that he might always know what he might rely upon with regard to the general temper of the people in this part of Carolina.

In the afternoon I had another interview with Mr. Smith, and it was arranged that we should start at break of day.

This was the plan we chose:

The ascent of the mountain was to be undertaken under the direction of two guides, who had had much experience in excursions of this nature. On several occasions they had scaled the highest peaks of the Blue Ridge. However, they had never attacked the Great Eyry, knowing that access to it was barred by a wall of insurmountable rocks; and, besides, before the manifestation of the recent phenomena this Great Eyry had never excited the curiosity of tourists. Nevertheless, we could have every confidence in these two guides, whom Mr. Smith knew personally as intrepid, skilful, and faithful men. They would shrink from no obstacle, and we were resolved to follow them.

Besides, as Mr. Smith remarked, it might now be no longer impossible to penetrate into the interior of the Great Eyry.

"Why not?" I inquired.

"Because a mass of rock was detached from the mountain some weeks ago, and it may have left a gap through which we could get."

"That would be a happy chance, Mr. Smith."

"We shall find out, Mr. Strock, and no later than to-morrow."

"Till to-morrow, then!"

III

GREAT EYRY

THE following day, at daybreak, Elias Smith and I left Morganton by the road which follows the left bank of the Sarawba river and leads to the little town of Pleasant Garden.

The guides accompanied us: Harry Horn, aged thirty, and James Bruck, aged twenty-five, both of them inhabitants of the little town and at the service of tourists who wished to visit the principal points of the Blue Ridge and the Cumberlands, which form the double chain of the Alleghenies. Intrepid climbers, strong of arm and leg, skilful and experienced, they knew this bit of the district well, right up to the foot of the range.

A carriage drawn by two good horses was to take us to the western boundary of the State. It only contained provisions for two or three days, as our trip would certainly not last longer than that.

It is needless to add that the Mayor of Morganton, in his capacity of mighty hunter, had taken his gun and brought along his dog Nisko, who ran and gambolled near the

carriage. Nisko would put up the game when we were in the woods or on the plains; but he was to stay with the driver at Wildon all the time we were making our ascent. He could not have followed us to the Great Eyry, because of the crevasses there were to be crossed and the rocks to be climbed.

The sky was clear and the air fresh, even now, at the end of April, which is sometimes severe in the American climate.

Clouds scudded swiftly before a variable breeze, which came off the broad wastes of the Atlantic, and between them sun rays stole, illuminating all the country.

The first day brought us as far as Pleasant Garden, where we passed the night with the mayor of the little town, a personal friend of Mr. Smith. I had opportunity to make a careful observation of this region, where cypress groves yield to marshes, and marshes give place to fields. The road, which is kept in pretty good repair, crosses or follows their line, without being lengthened by many twists and turns. In places of a marshy nature the cypresses are magnificent, with their erect and slender trunks, slightly swollen at the base. The breeze rustling through the pale green foliage set a-swinging the long grey fibres, the "Spaniards' beards," which

hung down to the ground from the lower branches of the trees.

There was a world of life in these forests. It fled before our carriage—mice, field-mice, parrots of brilliant hue and deafening loquacity, opossums, which scampered off with rapid leaps, carrying their little ones in their pouches; birds scattered in myriads among the foliage of banians, palms, and orange trees, whose buds were hastening to open to the first breath of spring, and clumps of rhododendrons, so thick sometimes that a man on foot could make no way through them.

Reaching Pleasant Garden in the evening, we found comfortable quarters for the night. The next day would bring us to Wildon Farm, at the foot of the range.

Pleasant Garden is a small market town of average importance. The Mayor gave us a cordial welcome and generous entertainment. We had a merry supper in the hall of his pretty dwelling, which was sheltered by great beech trees. Naturally the conversation turned upon the attempt we were about to make to explore the interior of the Great Eyry.

"You are right," our host said, emphatically. "Until we know what is going on, or what is hidden up there, our country folk will not be reassured."

"Nothing fresh has happened since the flames were last seen above the Great Eyry?" I inquired.

"Nothing, Mr. Strock. From Pleasant Garden it is easy to survey the upper ridge of the mountain as far as the Black Dome, which commands it. We have not heard a single suspicious sound, nor seen any light. And if it was a legion of devils roosting up there, it looks very much as if they had finished their infernal cooking and made off to some other lair in the Alleghenies!"

"Devils!" Mr. Smith exclaimed. "Well, I hope they haven't decamped without leaving some tracks, tips of their tails or their horns! We'll have a good look!"

The next day, the 29th, the carriage was ready for us at daybreak. Mr. Smith took his seat, I took mine. The horses set off briskly, urged by the driver's whip. At the end of this second day's journey since leaving Morganton, we halted at Wildon Farm, among the foothills of the Blue Ridge.

There was no change in the general aspect of the country. It was an unvarying alternation of woods and marshes, these latter, however, occurring at greater intervals owing to the steadily progressive elevation of the earth at the foot of the range. The country was

also less densely populated. There were only a few villages, almost lost under the mighty masses of the beech trees, and some isolated farms, abundantly watered by the many streamlets that issued from the ravines, tributaries of the Sarawba river. The fauna and flora were the same as the night before, and there was enough game to give a sportsman a good bag.

"I am really tempted to take my gun and whistle up Nisko," said Mr. Smith. "This is quite the first time I've been along here without letting fly at the hares and partridges. The good creatures won't know me. But unless our larder gives out we've got something else to think of to-day—our mystery hunt."

"And I hope we shan't go back as we came, Mr. Smith," I added.

During the morning we had to cross an endless plain, where the cypresses and palms were only dotted about in clumps and clusters. As far as the eye could see there reached a huge collection of little earth cabins, fantastically built, and swarming with little rodents. Tens of thousands of marmots lived there in flocks, of the kind more particularly known in America by the popular name of prairie dog. Although this is the name given to them, these animals have not the faintest resemblance to

any canine type. The explanation of the name is that they make a noise like the yelping of curs. And, in point of fact, while we were trotting rapidly by, we had to stop our ears!

Densely populated cities of quadrupeds like this are not uncommon in the United States. Amongst others, naturalists mention the appropriately named Dogville, which has a population of more than a million four-footed inhabitants.

These marmots, which live on roots, grass, and also grasshoppers, of which they are very fond, are inoffensive creatures, but their howling is enough to deafen one.

In the afternoon the Blue Ridge chain appeared, only six miles off, on a wide horizon. Its edge was outlined clearly against a background of blue sky, across which light clouds were sailing. Thickly wooded at its base, where the branches of conifers were densely interlaced, a few trees stood out also against a fantastic setting of gloomy rocks. Here and there rose quaint-shaped peaks, which, on the right hand, were over-topped by Black Dome's gigantic head, gleaming at moments in the sun's bright rays.

"Have you made an ascent of the Dome, Mr. Smith?" I inquired.

"No," he replied, "but I am told it is

pretty difficult. Besides, some tourists have reached its summit, and from all their accounts nothing can be seen of the interior of the Great Eyry from its point."

"That is true," the guide, Harry Horn, declared: "I have proved that myself."

"Perhaps the weather was not favourable," I suggested.

"On the contrary, Mr. Strock, it was very clear, but the rim of the Great Eyry is too high, and blocks the view."

"Good!" cried Smith. "I shall not be sorry to set foot where no one has set foot before!"

Anyhow, that day the Great Eyry seemed quite quiet, and neither smoke nor flame escaped from it.

At about five o'clock our carriage stopped at Wildon Farm, and its inmates came to greet their master. It was there that we were to spend this last night.

The horses were speedily unharnessed and taken round to the stable, where they found plenty of fodder, and the carriage was put up in the coach-house. The driver was to await our return. For the rest, Mr. Smith had no doubt that our mission would have been accomplished to the satisfaction of everybody when we got back to Morganton.

The farmer at Wildon assured us that nothing unusual had happened at the Great Eyry for some time. We all took supper together with the farm people, and our sleep was undisturbed throughout the night.

Our ascent of the mountain was to begin at daybreak the following day. The Great Eyry is not more than eighteen hundred feet in height, no great altitude, and the average in this range of the Alleghenies. We were free to assume, therefore, that the strain would not be excessive. A few hours ought to be enough to bring us to the top ridges of the great mass. It was true there might perhaps be difficulties on the way, precipices to clear, or obstacles to surmount with danger and great effort. That was the yet unknown, the hazard of our venture. As I have said, the guides could give us no information on this head. What troubled me was that in the neighbourhood the interior of the Great Eyry had the name of being inaccessible. But, to conclude, the fact had never been proved, and there was always the chance that the fall of mountain might have made a breach in the thickness of the rocky wall.

"Well," said Mr. Smith, after he had lighted the first pipe of the score or so he smoked every day, "we are off, and right foot fore-

most. As for knowing how long this climb of ours is going to take——"

"In any case, Mr. Smith," I interrupted, "we are quite determined to carry our investigation to the end?"

"Quite determined, Mr. Strock."

"My chief's orders are to wrest its secrets from this fiend of a Great Eyry."

"We will wrest them from him, whether he likes it or not," Mr. Smith replied.

"Since it is possible that our excursion may be prolonged beyond to-day," I added, "it will be well to provide ourselves with supplies."

"Don't be uneasy, Mr. Strock; our guides have two days' provisions in their game bags, and we are not going with empty pockets. Besides, if I am leaving good old Nisko at the farm, I am taking my gun. There is sure to be game in the belt of woods, and at the bottom of the gorges in the foothills. We'll strike a light to cook what we bag, unless we find a fire ready lighted up there."

"Ready lighted, Mr. Smith?"

"And why not, sir? Those flames, those splendid flames which scared our country-folk so badly! How do we know if their hearthstone is quite cold, if there is not still a little fire in the ashes? And then, if there is a crater inside there, it means that there

is a volcano, and is a volcano always so completely extinct that you can't find a bit of hot coal about it? 'Pon my word, it would be a poor kind of volcano that hadn't fire enough to boil an egg hard, or roast a potato! But, as I said before, we shall see, we shall see!"

For my own part I am free to confess that I had formed no opinion on the subject. My orders were to go and find out what this Great Eyry was. If there was no danger to be feared from it, well and good; everybody would know it and everybody's mind would be easy. But in my heart of hearts, and the feeling was a very natural one in a man possessed by curiosity, I would have been delighted, for my own personal satisfaction and for the glory with which it would cover my mission, if the Great Eyry proved to be a hot-bed of miracles which I should be the first to explain.

Our ascent was to be made in the following order: the two guides in front, to pick the practicable paths, and Elias Smith and I walking side by side, or one after the other, as the width of the track allowed.

Harry Horn and James Bruck ventured, to begin with, through a narrow gorge which wound its way along some pretty steep declivities where many shrubs with conical seed-vessels and sombre leaves, broad ferns and

wild currants, were mixed in a maze through which it would have been impossible to break one's way.

A world of birds filled the mass of woods with life. Among the noisiest of them, parrots, chattering volubly, filled the air with their shrill cries. It was difficult to hear the marmots running among the thickets, although they were there in hundreds.

The course of the torrent for which this gorge provided the bed wound and twisted up the slopes of the range. During the rainy season, or after some heavy thunderstorm, it must have rebounded in tumultuous cascades. But it certainly could only be supplied by the rains of Heaven, and the fact that we found no trace of it was clear evidence that it did not have its source in the high fastnesses of the Great Eyry.

After half an hour's travelling the ascent became so steep that we had to zigzag from right to left and lengthen our road by many a detour. The gorge became absolutely impracticable, without any adequate foothold. We would have had to catch hold of tufts of grass and crawl upon our knees, and under those conditions our ascent would not have been completed before sunset.

"My word!" exclaimed Mr. Smith, as he recovered his breath, "I understand why tourists are so rare on the Great Eyry—so rare that there never have been any to my knowledge!"

"The fact is," I replied, "that there would be a lot of grind and not much in the way of results! And if we hadn't special reasons for bringing our attempt to a satisfactory conclusion——"

"You never said a truer word," Harry Horn declared; " my mate and I have climbed to the top of the Black Dome several times, and we've never met so many difficulties."

"Difficulties which might easily become obstacles," James Bruck added.

The question now was how to choose on which side we should seek for a path. On the right hand and on the left rose branching masses of trees and shrubs. The right answer finally was to venture where the slopes were less steep. It might be that, after getting through the outskirts, our party would be able to go more surefootedly through the wooded part. Anyhow, one would not be going blindfolded. However, it was well not to forget that the eastern side of the Blue Ridge, with an inclination of fifty degrees, is scarcely practicable all along the range.

However this may be, the best thing was to trust to the special instinct of our two guides, and particularly of James Bruck. I really think this excellent fellow must have inherited his skill from a monkey and his agility from an antelope. Unfortunately, neither Elias Smith nor I could have ventured where this intrepid man went.

Nevertheless, so far as I myself am concerned, I hoped that I should not be left behind, being a climber by nature and quite hardened to physical exercise. Wherever James Bruck might go I was determined to follow, even at the expense of a tumble or two. But the same did not hold good of the first magistrate of Morganton, who was not so young, not so vigorous, not so sure of foot, and who was a bigger, stouter man. Up to now he had visibly been making every effort not to lag behind. Every now and then he blew like a grampus, and against his will I made him stop for breath.

To cut a long story short, it was made plain to us that the ascent of the Great Eyry would require a longer time than we had calculated. We had supposed that we should reach the wall of rock before eleven o'clock, whereas we should certainly be some hundreds of feet below it at mid-day. As a matter of fact,

about ten o'clock, after repeated attempts to discover some practicable paths, one of the guides gave the signal to halt. We were at the upper edge of the wooded belt, and the trees, being less close together, permitted the eye to see as far as the first strata of the Great Eyry.

"Well, well!" said Mr. Smith, leaning back against a big palm tree, "a brief respite, a snatch of sleep, and even a snatch of food wouldn't come amiss."

"For an hour," I replied.

"Yes; and after our lungs and our legs it is time for our stomachs to do a little work."

We all cordially agreed. It was important to recover our strength. What gave rise to some anxiety was the aspect then presented by the flank of the mountain up to the foot of the Great Eyry. Above us stretched one of those naked portions which are called "blades" in the country. No footpath was visible among its sheer rocks.

This fact did not fail to absorb the attention of our guides, and Harry Horn remarked to his comrade:

"That's not going to be easy."

"Impossible, perhaps," was James Bruck's answer.

The idea caused me real vexation. If I went down again without even having been

able to reach the Great Eyry, it would mean the complete failure of my mission, not to mention the curiosity I should have failed to satisfy. And when I presented myself again before Mr. Ward I should cut a sorry figure!

The game-bags were opened, and we fortified ourselves with bread and cold meat. We took a moderate pull at the flasks. Then, the meal ended—it had not lasted half an hour—Mr. Smith got up, ready to start again.

James Bruck took the lead, and we only had to follow him, trying not to lag behind. Our advance was slow. Our guides did not attempt to conceal their perplexity, and Harry Horn went on in front to reconnoitre the direction it was best to take definitely.

He was away about twenty minutes. When he came back he pointed north-west, and we resumed our march. It was on this side that the Black Dome reared up, three or four miles away. As I have said, it would have been useless to ascend that, because from its summit, even with a powerful glass, nothing could be seen of the interior of the Great Eyry. Our ascent was very laborious and very slow, especially along the slippery slopes strewn with a few shrubs and coarse tufts of vegetation. We had climbed a bare couple of hundred feet, when our leading guide came

to a stop before a deep crack, which cut across the ground at that spot. Roots lately snapped, branches lately broken down, blocks of rock reduced to dust, were strewn all over the place, as if an avalanche had swept over this flank of the mountain.

"That's where the huge rock that broke off the Great Eyry will have come down," James Bruck remarked.

"No doubt," Mr. Smith replied; "and our best plan, I think, will be to follow the path that it broke for itself as it fell."

And this was the path we did take—very wisely. The ruts cut by the falling block gave us foothold. Thus our ascent was made under easier conditions, almost in a straight line, and so well that about half-past eleven we were on the upper edge of the blade.

Before us, only a hundred paces off, but towering a hundred feet in height, rose the walls which formed the boundary of the Great Eyry.

On this side the framework was hewn in a most fantastic way: sharp points and needles, and, among other things, one rock whose strange design in profile took the shape of a huge eagle on the point of flight towards the upper regions of the air. It really looked as if, on this eastern side at least, the place were inaccessible.

"Let us rest for a few minutes," Mr. Smith suggested, "and then we will see if it is possible to circumvent this Great Eyry."

"Anyhow," Harry Horn remarked, "it must have been on this side that the block of rock broke away, and there is no sign of any gap on this side of the place."

That was the fact, and it was beyond question that the fall of rock had happened on this side. After ten minutes' rest the two guides got up again, and by a fairly easy slope we gained the edge of the plateau. We now only had to walk along the base of the rocks which rising some fifty feet above us, overhung us, spreading out like the rim of a basket. The result was that, even with an arrangement of long ladders, it would have been impossible to get up to the top ridge of the enclosure.

Yes, decidedly, the Great Eyry's aspect was absolutely fantastic in my eyes. It might have been peopled by dragons and chimeras, and other mythological monstrosities keeping guard upon it, and I should not have been surprised.

However, we proceeded to make the circuit of the enclosing wall, where Nature seemed to have done the work of man, so regular was it. Nowhere was there any breach in its curtain, nowhere any fissure in the rocks

through which one might have tried to insinuate oneself. Everywhere the crest upreared, a hundred feet in height, impossible to scale.

After following the edge of the plateau for an hour and a half we found ourselves where we had started, where we had made our last halt. I could not conceal my vexation at this discomfiture, and I could see that Mr. Smith was no less vexed than I was.

"Hang it all!" he exclaimed; "so we shall never know what is inside this confounded Great Eyry, or if it is a crater!"

"Volcano or not," I remarked, "it is not making any suspicious noise, and no smoke or flame is rising from it, nothing to foretell an imminent eruption."

Needless to say, its neighbourhood was deserted: by which I mean that there was no sign of life, except for two or three pairs of huge birds of prey hovering in the air above it. Our watches pointed to three o'clock, and Mr. Smith said irritably:

"If we stay here till evening we shan't be any wiser. We must go, Mr. Strock, if we want to get back to Pleasant Garden before night."

And, as I did not answer and did not leave my seat, he added, coming to me: "Well

Mr. Strock, you don't answer. Didn't you hear me?"

Honestly, I was mortified at having to abandon the project and go down again without accomplishing my task. But what were we to do? Was it in my power to break open this solid fortress, to scale these towering rocks?

We had to give in, and, with a last look towards the Great Eyry, I followed my companions.

Our return journey was effected without much difficulty, and without much fatigue. Before five o'clock we left the last slopes of the mountain, and soon the farmer at Wildon was receiving us in the hall, where refreshments and a substantial meal awaited us.

"So you could not get into the inside?" he inquired.

"No," Mr. Smith replied, "and I shall end by thinking that the Great Eyry has no existence outside the imagination of our good country bumpkins!"

At half-past eight our carriage was standing outside the house of the Mayor of Pleasant Garden, where we were to pass the night.

And while I was vainly trying to go to sleep, I asked myself whether it would not be well to stay for a few days in the little

town, and organise another expedition. But would it have had the least chance of success?

No, the wisest plan was to return to Washington and consult Mr. Ward. So the following evening, at Morganton, I paid my two guides, said good-bye to Mr. Smith and betook myself to the station, whence the express for Raleigh was starting.

IV

A MEETING OF THE AUTOMOBILE CLUB

WHETHER the Great Eyry mystery would be solved some day as a result of happenings not easily to be foreseen, was still a secret of the future. There was no doubt whatever that it was a matter of the very first moment to everybody, inasmuch as the safety of the inhabitants of this district of North Carolina possibly depended upon it.

A fortnight later, however, when I was back in Washington again, public attention was excited quite as violently by an event of a wholly different nature. This matter, too, was to prove every bit as mysterious as the phenomena of which the Great Eyry had just been the scene.

About the middle of this month of May the Pennsylvania newspapers informed their readers of the matter in question, which had occurred lately in several places in the State.

For some time past a most extraordinary vehicle had been travelling about the roads around the capital, Philadelphia; it moved at such tremendous speed that no idea could

be formed of its shape or nature, or even of its dimensions. Everybody agreed that it was an automobile. But with regard to its motive power, people were reduced to suggesting hypotheses of varying plausibility, and when popular imagination once sets to work upon a thing it is impossible to keep it within reasonable bounds.

At this date the most highly perfected automobiles, whatever their make, whether propelled by steam or petrol, by alcohol or electricity, barely exceeded a speed of ninety miles an hour, that is, about a mile and a half a minute—a speed hardly attained by the fastest expresses on the best railway systems of America or Europe.

Now the machine with which we are concerned certainly travelled at twice this speed.

It is unnecessary to say that such a pace constituted an excessive peril on the roads, for traffic and for foot passengers alike. This fast revolving mass, coming like a flash of lightning, heralded by an alarming roaring noise, caused a violent displacement of the air, which snapped the branches of the trees by the roadside, sent the animals that were grazing in the fields mad with terror, and scattered the birds, which could not withstand the whirlwinds of dust it created as it came.

And a remarkable detail, to which the newspapers drew particular attention, was that the macadam surface of the roads was scarcely scratched by the wheels of the huge contrivance, which left behind it no trace of the ruts cut by the wheels of heavy vehicles. There was only the lightest imprint, the merest skimming of the surface. It was its speed only which caused the dust to rise.

Naturally, complaints were raised throughout the various districts of Pennsylvania. These mad rushes of a mechanical invention, which threatened to upset everything and smash everything in its path, carriages and pedestrians alike, were intolerable. But what steps were to be taken to put a stop to it? Nobody knew to whom it belonged, whence it came or whither it went. It was not seen until it shot by like a cannon ball in its giddy course. One might as well attempt to catch a cannon ball in its flight the moment it left the cannon's mouth.

As I have said, no information was forthcoming as to the nature of the motive power of the machine. The only thing that was certain, that had been definitely ascertained, was that it left no smoke, no fumes, behind it, no odour of petrol or other mineral oil. The inference was that it was an invention

driven by electricity that had to be dealt with, and one whose accumulators, of an unknown model, contained some fluid that was, so to speak, inexhaustible.

Public imagination, wrought up to the highest pitch, next tried to discover something else and wholly different in this mysterious automobile.

Moreover, it was not only Pennsylvania that served as a racing track for this sporting freak. Police reports soon announced its exhibition in other States: in Kentucky, in the outskirts of Frankfort; in Ohio, in the outskirts of Columbus; in Tennessee, in the outskirts of Nashville; in Missouri, round about Jefferson; and in Illinois, on the roads leading to Chicago.

In view of the alarm, it was now "up to" the municipal authorities to take all possible measures to meet this public danger. To catch a piece of machinery hurled along at such a speed was not feasible. The surest way would be to set up solid barriers on the roads with which it would collide sooner or later, and smash itself into a thousand pieces.

"Good!" said the sceptics, "this maniac will dodge the obstacles all right."

"And jump over them, if need be!" said someone else.

Such was the situation which very properly absorbed the attention of the chief police at Washington, who were determined to put an end to it.

Now we come to what happened in the last week of May, which lent colour to the supposition that the United States were freed from the "monster" that had defied capture hitherto. Also, after the New World, there was ground for believing that the Old one would not now be exposed to a visitation from this automobilist, who was as dangerous as he was outrageous.

In the last week of this month of May, the following fact was reported in the newspapers of the United States, and the nature of the comments it evoked from the general public will readily be imagined.

The Automobile Club had just arranged a meeting in Wisconsin, on one of the roads of that State, whose capital is Madison. This road provides an excellent track for a length of two hundred miles, going from Prairie-du-Chien, a town on the western frontier, through Madison, and ending a little above Milwaukee, on the banks of Lake Michigan. Only one road in the world is superior to it, namely, the road between Nikko and Namode in Japan, which is bordered with gigantic cypresses

and runs in a straight line for more than fifty miles.

A large number of cars of the very best makes were entered for this match, and it had been decided that every kind of motor should be allowed to compete. Even motor cycles could contest the prizes with automobiles.

According to calculations based on the maximum of speed that could be obtained, eighty to ninety miles an hour, the time taken up by this international race would be something under three hours for the course of two hundred miles. So, to prevent danger, the authorities at Wisconsin had stopped the traffic between Prairie-du-Chien and Milwaukee throughout the morning of May 30th.

Thus there were no accidents to be anticipated, except such as might occur to the competing cars during the actual race. That was their own affair, as everybody freely acknowledged. But ordinary carriages and foot passengers had nothing to fear, owing to the precautions that had wisely been taken.

There was an extraordinary concourse of people, and not only from Wisconsin. Several thousands of eager spectators had hastened from the neighbouring States of Illinois,

Michigan, Iowa, Indiana, and even from the State of New York.

The signal to start was to be given at eight o'clock in the morning by a timekeeper. In order to avoid crowding and consequent accidents, the automobiles were to follow each other at intervals of two minutes over the road, whose sides were black with spectators. The first prize would go to the car which covered the entire distance between Prairie-du-Chien and Milwaukee in the shortest time.

The first ten cars, chosen by lot, started between eight and eight-twenty. Barring accidents, they would surely reach the goal before eleven. The rest were to follow in the order of drawing. Police superintended the road at every half mile. The spectators, spread along the whole length of the course, were as numerous at Madison, the half-way point, as they were at the start, and formed a large crowd at Milwaukee, where the match finished.

An hour and a half had gone. Not a single car remained at Prairie-du-Chien. Telephonic communication kept the town informed every five minutes of the state of the ring and the order in which the competitors were following each other. It was a Renault car, of four cylinders and twenty horse-power, with Michelin tyres, that was leading half-way

between Madison and Milwaukee, with a Harward-Watson and a Dion-Bouton following it closely. A few accidents had happened already, engines working badly, cars brought up standing and so forth, and in all probability not more than a dozen competitors would complete the course. But if there were a few injured, they were none of them seriously hurt, and besides, if there had been any deaths, death is a detail of absolutely no importance in this amazing country, America.

It was more particularly at the approaches to Milwaukee that the interest and excitement rose to the highest pitch. The winning-post was erected on the left shore of the Michigan, and was dressed with all the international colours.

To cut the story short, after ten o'clock it was manifest that the big prize, of twenty thousand dollars, was now being fought for by only five automobiles, two American, two French, and one English, all their other rivals having dropped far behind through one accident and another. It is easy to imagine how frantic the excitement became now when national pride was at stake.

Now, about half-past nine by the municipal clock of Prairie-du-Chien, and about two

miles before that little town, there was suddenly heard an appalling rolling roar, which came from a dense cloud of dust, accompanied by whistling screams like those of a ship's syren.

The people only just had time to fall back and escape a ruin which would have involved victims in scores. The cloud swept by like a water-spout, and it was as much as was possible to distinguish what it was that was possessed of such a speed.

Without exaggeration, it was making two hundred and forty miles an hour.

It disappeared in an instant, leaving behind it a long trail of white dust, just as the engine of an express train leaves a long trail of steam.

Evidently it was an automobile, equipped with some extraordinary engines. If it kept up the same speed for an hour it would catch up the leading automobiles, would pass them at a speed double theirs, and would reach the winning-post first.

And then on all sides rose raucous shouts, although the spectators massed along the roadside had nothing now to fear.

"It was that machine that was talked of a fortnight ago!"

"Yes; the one that went through Illinois, Ohio, and Michigan, and that the police could not stop."

"And which no one had heard any more of, luckily for the public safety."

"They thought it was done for, smashed up, gone for good!"

When the first shock of stupefaction had passed, the most clear-headed ran to the telephone, to warn the various stations, in anticipation of the peril which threatened the racing automobiles strung out along the road when the unknown individual who drove this terrible, thundering car should come upon them like an avalanche. They would all be overwhelmed, pulverised and obliterated, and who could tell whether the man himself would not emerge safe and sound even from such an appalling collision as that?

After all, this very prince of chauffeurs must be so skilful, must control his machine with such sureness of eye and hand, that he would undoubtedly avoid any obstacle. But no matter: in spite of the steps taken by the authorities at Wisconsin to reserve the road exclusively for the competitors in the international match, the road was not reserved now.

The scouts, who had been forewarned by telephone, and had been ordered to stop the race for the Automobile Club's great prize, reported that according to their estimate,

this astonishing car was making not less than two hundred and thirty miles an hour. Its speed was so great, as it passed them, that they could hardly make out the shape of the car, a sort of spindle affair, whose length could not be much more than thirty feet. Its wheels revolved with such velocity that the spokes were indistinguishable. Finally, it left no steam or smoke or smell behind.

As for the driver, shut up within the interior of his car, it was quite impossible to get a glimpse of him, and so he remained as unknown as when his appearance on the roads of the United States was first advertised.

The telephones had forewarned Milwaukee of the pending arrival of this outsider. The excitement caused by the news can be imagined. And the very first question that arose was how to stop this "projectile," how to build a barricade across its path, against which it might smash itself into a thousand pieces. But would there be time? Might not the car appear any minute? Why do so, indeed, for would it not be obliged to put a stop to its career willy-nilly, since the road terminated at Lake Michigan, and it could not go any farther unless it changed itself into some navigable craft.

Such were the thoughts that passed through the minds of the spectators assembled in front of Milwaukee, after they had taken the precaution to remove to a distance where they would not be bowled over by this water-spout.

It was not any minute now, but any second that their eager eyes expected to see the automobile of whose coming they had been warned.

It was not yet eleven o'clock when a distant rumbling was heard upon the road from which the dust rose in eddying circles. Piercing whistles rent the air, warning all to make way for the monstrous thing. It did not slacken speed. Yet Lake Michigan was a bare half-mile away, and its own momentum was enough to hurl it into it. Could it be that the engineer had lost control of his engine?

There was soon no room for doubt upon the point. Like a flash of lightning the car arrived off Milwaukee. When it had passed the town, did it engulf itself in the waters of Lake Michigan?

In any case, when it had disappeared beyond a bend in the road, not a trace of its passage was to be seen.

V

OFF THE COAST OF NEW ENGLAND

At the time when these events were reported by the American newspapers I had been back in Washington for a month.

Immediately upon my arrival I had been careful to wait upon my chief. I was not able to see him. For domestic reasons he was to be away for some weeks. But it was not to be supposed that Mr. Ward was unaware of the failure of my mission. The various newspapers of North Carolina had reported with great minuteness all the details of my ascent of the Great Eyry in the company of the Mayor of Morganton.

The great vexation my futile attempt caused me will be readily understood, to say nothing of my unsatisfied curiosity. And indeed, I could not reconcile myself to the idea that it would not be satisfied some day. What, not wrest its secrets from the Great Eyry? When I would make the attempt ten times, twenty times, even at the risk of my life?

Manifestly, the work involved in gaining access to the interior of the aerie was not beyond the compass of human means. There

was nothing impossible in building a scaffolding up to the top of its high walls, or boring a tunnel through the thick wall of the enclosure. Our engineers undertake tasks more difficult every day. But in the case of the Great Eyry account had to be taken of the expense, which, in hard cash, would have been out of all proportion to the advantages to be derived from it. It might have to be reckoned in thousands of dollars, and, after all, what good would have been effected by this costly undertaking? If a volcano did yawn open at this point of the Blue Ridge, no one could have put it out, and if it menaced the district with an eruption no one could have prevented it. So all this labour would have been done at pure loss, and only public curiosity would have been satisfied.

In any case, however particular the interest might be that I felt in the affair, and however ardently I might desire to feel the Great Eyry under my feet, it was not at my own personal expense that I should have contemplated undertaking the task, and I was reduced to remarking privately to myself:

"That is a job which one of our American millionaires ought to tackle! That is a work which the Goulds, the Astors, the Vanderbilts, the Rockfellers, the Mackays, or the

Pierrepont-Morgans ought to carry out, whatever the cost! Well! They won't give it a thought, and those Great Trust gentlemen have plenty of other things in their heads!"

Ah, if only that enclosure had had in its inside a few veins of gold or of silver, perhaps they would have come forward.

It was in the morning of June 15th that Mr. Ward received me in his office. He was aware of the failure of the inquiry which he had commissioned me to make. Nevertheless, he gave me a cordial welcome.

"So there is poor old Strock!" he exclaimed, as I came in. "Poor Strock who has not been successful!"

"Not a bit more successful than if you had ordered me to make an investigation on the face of the moon, Mr. Ward," was my reply. "It is true, we found ourselves confronted with obstacles purely material but wholly insurmountable in the conditions under which we worked."

"I believe you, Strock, I quite believe you! But what is certain is that you found out nothing at all of what is going on in the inside of the Great Eyry."

"Nothing at all, sir."

"However, you did not see any flame?"

"None at all."

"And you did not hear any suspicious noise?"

"None at all."

"It still has to be ascertained if there is a volcano there?"

"Still, sir, and if the volcano does exist there is good ground for supposing that it is sleeping very soundly."

"Ah!" Mr. Ward rejoined, "there is nothing to say it won't wake up some day! D'you see, Strock, it isn't enough that a volcano is sleeping, it's got to be extinct! Unless all we have been told originated in Carolina's imagination——"

"I don't think that, sir," I answered. "Mr. Smith, the Mayor of Morganton, and his friend, the Mayor of Pleasant Garden, are very positive on the point. Yes! Flames were seen above the Great Eyry! And, yes! Noises did come out of it! There is no doubt about the reality of those phenomena!"

"Granted," said Mr. Ward. "I admit that the mayors and the people under their administration were not mistaken. Well, whatever it may be, the Great Eyry has not disclosed its secret!"

"If it is essential to find it out, sir. You have only to put a price upon it, and with the necessary outlay, pickaxe and mine will get the better of those walls."

"No doubt," Mr. Ward replied. "But that labour is not urgent, and it is better to

wait. Besides, it is possible that Nature herself will yield up the mystery at the finish."

"Believe me, Mr. Ward, I am sorry I was not able to accomplish the task you entrusted me with."

"That is all right. Cheer up, Strock! We're not always successful in our line of business, and the campaigns of the police are not always crowned with success. Just consider, in criminal cases, how many guilty escape us; and I will go farther and say that not one would be arrested if they were more intelligent, and especially less imprudent, if they did not compromise themselves by some stupidity! But they give themselves away by talking heedlessly! In my opinion there should be nothing easier than to prepare a crime, a murder, or a robbery, and to carry it out, without leaving any suspicion behind, in such a way as to baffle all pursuit. You quite understand, Strock, I am not proposing to give lessons in skill and caution to our friends the criminals! And, besides, as I said before, there are plenty whom the police have never been able to detect!"

On this matter I was absolutely at one with my chief: it is in the world of malefactors that one meets the most fools!

However, I must own that what seemed

to me at least surprising was that the authorities, municipal or other, had not yet thrown light upon the happenings of which certain States had recently been the theatre. So when Mr. Ward spoke with me upon this subject I could not conceal my great surprise.

It was the question of the elusive vehicle which had just been careering about the roads, to the great danger of the pedestrians, horses and carriages which frequent them. The conditions of speed under which it beat all records of automobilism have been explained. From the very beginning the authorities had been warned, and gave orders to place opposition in the way of this terrible inventor. He sprang up no one knew whence, appeared and disappeared like a flash of lightning. Active and numerous police had taken the field against him; they had never been able to catch him up. And now, only lately, between Prairie-du-Chien and Milwaukee, in open competition organised by the American Automobile Club, he had covered the course of two hundred miles in less than two hours!

And then, not a word of news as to what had become of the car! When it reached the end of the road, had it been carried on by its own momentum, and, unable to stop,

been swallowed up in the waters of Lake Michigan? Were we to suppose that the man and his car had perished together, and that nothing more would be heard of one or the other? The vast majority refused to admit the possibility of that solution, which would have been the most satisfactory, and quite expected to see him turn up again in greater form than ever!

In Mr. Ward's eyes the occurrence belonged to the miraculous, and I shared his view. If this chauffeur did not re-appear, there really would be grounds for ranking his appearance among those mysteries which it is not permitted to man to penetrate!

My chief and I had talked about this affair and I thought that our conversation was drawing to an end, when, after taking a few steps up and down his room, he said to me:

"Yes: nothing could be stranger than what happened on the Milwaukee road during the International meeting. But here is something quite as strange."

Mr. Ward handed me a report which the Boston police had just sent in to him relating to a matter of which that very evening's papers were to be full.

While I was reading Mr. Ward went back to his desk, where he finished the corres-

pondence on which he had been engaged when I called. I took a seat near the window and studied the report with the closest attention.

For several days past the New England seas, within view from the coasts of Maine, Connecticut, and Massachusetts, had been troubled by an apparition, the nature of which no one had been able to determine.

A large moving object rose out of the water, two or three miles from the shore, and proceeded to indulge in rapid evolutions. Then it moved away, skimming on the surface of the sea, and was speedily lost to sight in the offing.

This object moved at such a high speed that the best glasses could hardly follow it. In length it could not have been more than thirty feet or so. It was spindle-shaped in structure and greenish in hue, which rendered it scarcely distinguishable from the sea. The portion of the American coast from which it had been observed most often was the stretch between Cape North in the State of Connecticut and Cape Sable, on the western point of Nova Scotia.

At Providence, Boston, Portsmouth, and Portland, steam launches had made many attempts to get near this moving object and even to give it chase. They never

succeeded in coming up with it. It was soon deemed useless to go in pursuit of it. In a few moments it got out of range of sight.

At first the sailors and fishermen supposed that it must be some mammal of the Cetacean order. Now, as everybody knows, these animals dive with a certain regularity, and after a few minutes under the water come up to the surface again and throw out through their air holes columns of liquid mixed with air. Now as yet, this animal—if it was an animal—had never "sounded," as whalers say, had never escaped by diving, and no one had ever seen or heard the heavy puffs of its breathing.

If, then, it did not belong to the genus of marine mammals, was it to be deemed some unknown monster, which came up from the depths of the ocean, one of those that figure in the legendary tales of ancient times? Was it to be ranked among the cuttle-fish and krakens, and leviathans and famous sea-serpents, by which it would be so dangerous to be attacked?

In any case, since this monster, whatever it might be, had been seen in the New England waters, no small craft, no fishing smacks had dared to trust themselves to the deep sea.

The moment its appearance was signalled, they hurriedly put back to the nearest port.

This was only what prudence dictated, and, if the animal were aggressive by nature, was better than to run the risk of being attacked by it.

With regard to ocean-going vessels, the big steamers, these had nothing to fear from the monster, whale, or whatever else it might be. Their crews had sighted it on several occasions, at a distance of several miles. But immediately they tried to overtake it, it made off so fast that it would have been impossible to get near to it. On one occasion a small government cruiser put out from Boston harbour, with the intention, if not of chasing it, at least of sending a few shells at it. In a few moments the animal put itself out of range and the attempt was useless. For the rest, up to the present time it did not appear that it had any intention of attacking the fishing boats.

At this point I stopped reading, and turning to Mr. Ward said:

"I gather that there has been no ground for complaint yet about the presence of this monster. It runs away from big ships. It does not make a rush for small ones. The excitement ought not to be very great among the people on the seashore."

"But it is, Strock, as this report proves."

"But the brute does not appear to be dangerous, sir. Besides, one of two things is bound to happen; either it will leave these waters some day, or it will be captured and we shall see it in the Washington Museum."

"And suppose it is not a marine monster?" Mr Ward rejoined.

"What else should it be?" I asked, quite surprised by his reply.

"Go on reading!" he said.

Which I proceeded to do, and this is what I learned from the second part of the report, some passages of which my chief had underlined in red pencil.

For some time everybody had taken it for granted that it was a marine monster, and that, provided it were hunted energetically, it would ultimately relieve these waters of its presence. But it was not long before a change of opinion took place. In the end some people, better advised, asked themselves whether, instead of an animal, this thing were not a navigable machine come to make its evolutions in the New England waters.

The machine must certainly be one of very unusual perfection. It was possible that before revealing the secret of his invention the inventor was seeking to arouse public attention and even some alarm among nautical people.

Such perfect security in manœuvring, such speed in evolution, such ease in escaping pursuit, thanks to its extraordinary power of movement, were quite enough to stimulate curiosity!

At this period of time great progress had been made in the art of navigation. The Atlantic liners attained such speed that five days sufficed them to cover the whole distance between the old and the new continents. And engineers had not said their last word.

Nor had the navy lagged behind. Cruisers, torpedo-boats, and torpedo-destroyers could vie with the fastest mail-boats of the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian oceans.

However, if it were now a question of a vessel of an entirely new model, it had not yet been possible to observe its exterior form. As for the motive power upon which it relied, this must be of a force unapproached by the most highly perfected engines known. There was no means of ascertaining the fluid, steam or electric, from which it obtained its power. The only thing certain was that as it had no sails it made no use of the wind, and as it had no funnel, it did not go by steam.

At this point of the report I broke off my reading a second time and pondered over what I had just read.

"What are you thinking of, Strock?" my chief inquired.

"This, sir; that the motor power of this vessel must be as powerful and as unknown as that of that extraordinary automobile of which we have heard nothing more since the American Club race."

"Is that the conclusion you have come to?"

"It is, sir."

And then this next conclusion obtruded itself: if the mysterious chauffeur had disappeared, if he had perished with his car in the waters of Lake Michigan, it would be necessary to discover at any cost the secret of the no less mysterious navigator, and to hope that he would not be swallowed up in the depths of the sea before he had yielded it up. Is it not to the interest of an inventor to give his invention the light of day? Would not America or any other Power give him the price he asked for it?

Unfortunately, if the inventor of the terrestrial machine had always preserved his incognito, was there not ground for fear that the inventor of the marine one might desire to preserve his, too? Even admitting that the former still existed, nothing more had been heard of him. With regard to the latter, might not the same occur, and after

making his evolutions in view of Boston, Portsmouth, and Portland, might not he disappear in his turn and leave no news behind him?

What gave some value to this theory was that since the arrival of the report at Washington, that is to say, for the last twenty-four hours, the coast semaphores had not signalled the presence of the amazing machine in the offing.

What is more, it had not shown itself in other waters. Still, to have guaranteed its final disappearance would at least have been rash.

Another important point ought to be noted; the idea of an octopus, or cetacean or kraken, of any marine animal in short, seemed to have been abandoned entirely. On this very day the American newspapers, all absorbed by the subject and enlarging upon it, agreed upon the existence of a navigable machine invested with highly superior qualities of evolution and speed. All were unanimous in saying that it must be equipped with electric motor power, though no one could conceive from what source it drew its electricity.

But so far the press had omitted to call the attention of the public—no doubt it

would not be long before they did so—to a singular coincidence which must strike the imagination, and which Mr. Ward pointed out to me at the very moment I was thinking of it myself.

In point of fact it was not until the disappearance of the famous automobile that the no less famous vessel had shown itself. Now, both these machines possessed an absolutely prodigious power of locomotion. If both appeared again, the one on land the other on sea, the same danger would menace shipping, pedestrians, and carriages. And then it would be imperative that by some means or other the police should interfere to secure the public safety on the high roads and high seas too!

That is what Mr. Ward remarked to me, and it was obvious. But how was that desirable result to be attained?

Finally, after a conversation which was much prolonged I was about to take my leave when Mr. Ward checked me.

"Don't you remember, Strock, that there is a strange resemblance in the appearance of the vessel and the automobile?"

"There certainly is, sir."

"Well, who knows whether the two things are not one and the same?"

VI

THE FIRST LETTER

After leaving Mr. Ward I went back to my own quarters in Long Street.

I should have plenty of time to indulge in my reflections there, free from interruption, since I had neither wife nor child. My whole domestic staff consisted of a single old servant who, after being in my mother's service, had been in mine for the past fifteen years.

A month before I had been given a holiday. It still had a fortnight to run, unless some unforeseen circumstances arose or some business cropped up which would not brook delay.

As I have shown, my holiday had been broken for three days by the investigation into the phenomena of the Great Eyry.

And now, perhaps, the task would be allotted to me of throwing light upon the events of which the Milwaukee road on the one hand, and the Boston waters on the other, had been the theatre. I should soon know. But how was one to pick up the track of the automobile and of the vessel? It was undeniable that public interest, the actual security

of the seas and roads, demanded that an inquiry should be prosecuted to this end. But what could one do while the chauffeur or chauffeurs were not signalled by those who were watching for them, and, even if they were, how were they to be laid hands upon in mid-career?

When I got home I had luncheon, lighted my pipe, and unfolded my newspaper. I am free to confess that politics interested me very little. So I turned first of all to the news headlines.

Naturally, my first thought was to see if there was any information from North Carolina about the Great Eyry affair. There might, perhaps, be some communication from Morganton or Pleasant Garden. Mr. Smith had solemnly promised to keep me posted. Also, a telegram would give me notice if the aerie were lit up by flames. I quite believe that the Mayor of Morganton was as anxious as I was to force an entrance into the enclosure, and asked nothing better than to make another attempt if an opportunity arose. But since I had left the place no despatch had reached me.

I learned nothing new from the paper. It dropped from my hands unheeded, and I remained lost in thought.

What kept on recurring to my mind was Mr. Ward's opinion that perhaps the automobile and the vessel were one and the same thing. Most probably at least the two machines were the work of the same hand. And beyond question, it was an identical motor power which gave them their excessive speed, more than double the records hitherto made both on land and sea.

"The same inventor," I echoed.

Manifestly there was nothing contrary to probability in that. The very fact that the two machines had not been seen simultaneously was a certain presumption in its favour.

And I said to myself:

"First, the Great Eyry mystery, now the Boston Bay mystery! Shall we fare with the second as we did with the first? Shall we fail to solve them, the one as completely as the other?"

I ought to remark that this new affair caused a considerable sensation, seeing that it threatened the general security. It was only the inhabitants of the district in the immediate neighbourhood of the Blue Ridge that would be imperilled by an eruption or an earthquake. On the other hand, the vehicle, or the vessel, might appear on any road of the United States, or in any American

waters, and, when they did re-appear every single citizen of the Republic would be exposed to very real danger.

It was like being in danger of a thunderbolt, without being forewarned by any weather signs! Outside his own front door, every citizen ran the risk of being surprised by the sudden arrival of the chauffeur, whom it was impossible to avoid! Go and risk your own person in a street or on a road raked by a hail of bullets! That was the point of view emphasised by thousands of newspapers eagerly read by the public.

So I was not surprised that people's imaginations should be excited by these disclosures, and especially that of my old servant, who was very credulous of any tale of the supernatural.

Thus to-day, after dinner, while she was clearing the table, Grad stopped, with a water-bottle in one hand, and a plate in the other, and looking at me said:

"Nothing new to-day, sir?"

"Nothing," I answered, knowing what she meant by the question.

"The car has not come back?"

"No, Grad."

"Nor the vessel?"

"Nor the vessel: that is to say, not so far as the best informed papers say."

"But—from your office?"

"My office does not know anything more."

"Then, if you please, sir, what is the good of the police?"

"That is a question that I have had to ask myself many a time."

"That's comforting, isn't it! and one fine day that wretched chauffeur will turn up unannounced and we shall see him in Washington, shooting through Long Street at the risk of running over every one who's going by."

"Oh, there might be a chance of arresting him then, Grad."

"That won't come off, sir!"

"Why not?"

"Because that chauffeur is the devil, and you can't arrest the devil!"

Verily, I thought to myself, the devil has broad shoulders, and I quite believe he was only invented in order to enable a lot of excellent people to explain the unexplainable! It was he who lit the flames in the Great Eyry! It was he who beat the speed record on the Wisconsin main road! It is he who is manœuvring in the sea off Connecticut and Massachusetts!

But we may disregard this intervention of the spirit of evil, which corresponds, I am

aware, to the intelligence of a few undeveloped brains. What was beyond all doubt was that a human being was actually making use of one or of two mechanical means of locomotion which were infinitely superior to the most highly perfected machines both upon land and sea.

And the next question was:

Why did we not hear any more of him? Was he afraid that ultimately we might secure possession of his person and discover the secret of his invention, which no doubt he was anxious to preserve? Unless indeed—and that was the answer to which one always got back—unless he had met with some accident and taken his secret with him to the other world! And if he had perished, either in the waters of Lake Michigan or in the New England sea, how should traces of him ever be found again? He would have passed like a meteor, like an asteroid through space, and in the course of a thousand years his great adventure would have become a myth.

For some time the American, and then the European newspapers were absorbed by this event. Articles were piled on articles! Lies were heaped on lies! There was a perfect flood of tittle-tattle! The public of both continents took an enormous interest in it, as was indeed intelligible. It is even not

impossible that some of the European Powers were half jealous that America should have been selected by this inventor as the field for his experiments, who, if he were an American, might perhaps enable his country to benefit by his invention! Would not the possession of such a machine absolutely guarantee the United States a pre-eminence that could not be contested?

On the 10th, for the first time, the *New York* published a ringing article on this subject. Comparing the speed of the fastest cruisers of the navy with that of the new machine in course of navigation, it showed that, thanks to its speed, America, if she obtained the ownership of it, would have Europe at only three days' distance from her while she would still retain five days' distance from Europe.

If the police had been anxious to ascertain the nature of the Great Eyry phenomena, they displayed a no less keen desire to know something definite about the chauffeur, of whom no more was being heard. It was a topic to which Mr. Ward willingly recurred. My chief, I know, and not with the intention of causing me the least humiliation, was constantly making references to my expedition to Carolina and to its failure, while he

fully recognised that the failure was due to no fault of mine. When walls are too high to be got over without a ladder, and when one hasn't got the ladder, it is clear that one cannot pass them—unless one makes a breach in them. But that did not prevent Mr. Ward from saying to me on more than one occasion:

"Well, my poor old Strock, you failed that time, didn't you?"

"I certainly did, sir, and so would anyone else in my place. It is a question of expense. Are you willing to incur it?"

"Never mind, Strock, never mind. By the way, this automobile and boat affair, suppose you succeeded in clearing that up, what a satisfaction for us, what a splendid thing for you!"

"Very true, sir, and if only I am given orders to get to work!"

"Who knows, Strock? No hurry! No hurry!"

This was how matters stood when, on the morning of the 15th of June, after the post had come in, Grad brought me a letter, a registered letter for which I had to sign a receipt.

I looked at the address on this letter, which was written in a hand I did not know.

It was dated two days before, and the post mark was Morganton.

Morganton? I took it for granted that the letter came from Mr. Elias Smith.

"Yes," I said to my old servant, "it is Mr. Smith who is writing. It can't be anyone else. He is the only person I know at Morganton. And if he has written, as we agreed, it is because he has got something important to tell me."

"Morganton?" Grad returned. "Isn't that the place where the demons lighted their fire?"

"That's the place, Grad."

"I hope the master is not going back there?"

"Why not?"

"Because you will end up by remaining in that Great Eyry boiler, and I don't want the master to do anything of the sort."

"Don't be afraid, Grad, and to begin with let us find out what it's all about."

I broke the seals on the envelope, which was made of very thick paper. The seals, in red wax, showed in relief a kind of shield adorned with three stars.

I took the letter from the envelope. It was only a single sheet, folded in four and written on the right side only.

My first thought was to look at the signature.

There was no signature: only four initials after the last line.

"It's not from the Mayor of Morganton," I remarked.

"Who is it from?" Grad inquired.

While I was examining the initials, which served as all the signature, I said to myself:

"I don't know anyone to whom they can refer, either at Morganton or anywhere else!"

The writing of the letter was rather vigorous, the down strokes and the up strokes sharply marked—a score of lines in all.

The following is a copy of the letter, the original of which I most carefully preserved, for very good reason—dated, to my immense amazement, from the mysterious Great Eyry:

"Great Eyry, Blue Ridge,
"North Carolina.
"*June* 13.

"*To Mr. Strock, Chief Inspector of Police—*
34 *Long Street, Washington.*

"Sir,—You have been entrusted with a commission to effect an entrance into the Great Eyry.

"You came on the 28th of April, accompanied by the Mayor of Morganton and two guides.

"You ascended as far as the enclosure, and you made the round of the walls, which were too high to be scaled.

"You sought for a breach and you did not find one.

"Know this: people do not get into the Great Eyry, and if they did get in they would not get out.

"Do not try to renew your effort, which would be as useless the second time as it was the first, and would entail serious consequences upon yourself.

"So act upon this advice, or ill will befall you!

"M.O.T.W."

VII

THREE OF THEM

I ACKNOWLEDGE at once that my surprise was great when I read this letter. Exclamations of astonishment escaped my lips. The old servant looked at me, hardly knowing what to think.

"Have you received bad news, sir?"

To Grad's question—I had few secrets from her—I replied simply by reading her the letter from beginning to end.

Grad listened, looking at me with genuine anxiety.

"A real puzzler," said I, shrugging my shoulders.

When she had left me I again read this most unexpected letter, and after consideration decided that it must be the work of some sorry joker. There could be no mistake. My adventure was generally known. As the newspapers had reported in detail our business in North Carolina, and the attempt we had made to get into the enclosure of the Great Eyry, everybody knew why Mr. Smith and I had not met with success. And then some

practical joker—he is not unknown even in America—had seized his pen and written this threatening letter in order to make a fool of me.

Indeed, if the place in question were used as a refuge by a band of criminals, with reason to fear that the police had discovered their retreat, not one of them would have been so imprudent as to disclose it. Was it not much more to their interest that their presence in this lair should remain unknown? Would it not be a plain incitement to the police to make fresh explorations in this region of the Blue Ridge! When it was a matter of capturing a whole bunch of suspicious characters, they would be caught all right! Melinite or dynamite would soon break open the enclosure! But how did these ruffians get into it, unless some passage existed which we had not discovered? However this might be, and even granting this, not one of them would have been so rash as to send me this letter.

So the remaining explanation was that it was written either by some practical joker or by a lunatic, and my opinion was that there was no reason for me to trouble myself about it otherwise, or even to think any more about it.

Therefore, after a momentary thought of reporting the incident to Mr. Ward, I decided not to do so. He would not have attached the least importance to the letter. However, I was careful not to tear it up, and I locked it away in my desk in case of developments. If I should receive other epistles of the same sort, and signed with the same initials, I would add them to this one, and give them no more heed.

A few days passed by, during which I went as usual to the police station. I had a few reports to finish, and there was nothing to lead me to suppose that I should have to leave Washington soon. But is one ever sure of the morrow in our line of business? Many a matter may crop up which sends you careering over the United States, from Oregon to Florida, and Maine to Texas!

Nothing more was heard of the chauffeur or chauffeurs. I knew that the government had given orders for all the roads, rivers, lakes, and American waters to be watched. But how is it possible to keep an effective watch over so immense a country? With the Atlantic on one side and the Pacific on the other, and with the vast Gulf of Mexico washing the southern shores, the elusive vessel had an immense area for its

evolution in which it could not possibly be captured.

But as I said before, neither machine had been seen again, and on the occasion of their last appearances the inventor had not exactly chosen the least frequented places, the Wisconsin main road on a race day and the Boston waters, which hundreds of craft plied over every hour of the twenty-four!

So if the inventor had not perished—which was always possible—he was either now out of America, perhaps in the seas of the Old World, or he was lying hid in some retreat known to himself alone, and but for some chance——

"Ah!" I said to myself sometimes, "for a retreat at once secret and inaccessible, this eccentric gentleman could not find anything better than the Great Eyry! It is true a boat could not get there, nor could an automobile! Only the biggest birds, eagles or condors, can find refuge there!"

I ought to observe that since my return to Washington no new outbreak of flame had frightened the inhabitants of the district. As Mr. Elias Smith had not written to me I rightly concluded that nothing abnormal had occurred. Everything led one to suppose that both matters, which had excited such

tremendous curiosity and uneasiness in the public mind, were like to lapse into complete oblivion.

On June 19th, about nine o'clock, I was going to my office when, as I left my house, I noticed two individuals who were looking at me with a certain persistence. As I did not know them I attached no meaning to it, and if my attention was drawn to the matter, it was chiefly because my excellent Grad spoke about it when I got home.

For several days my old servant had noticed that two men seemed to be dogging my steps; they walked up and down in front of my house for a hundred yards or so, and followed me, it seems, when I went up Long Street, on my way to the police station.

"You are quite sure of what you tell me?" I asked.

"Yes, sir, and only yesterday when you came home, these men, who were close at your heels, went away the minute the door was shut!"

"Come now, Grad, there is no mistake about it?"

"No, sir."

"Would you know these two men if you saw them again?"

"Yes, I should recognise them."

"Come, come! my dear Grad," I answered laughing; "I can see you have the real policeman instinct! I shall have to engage you for the detective force!"

"Have your joke, sir, have your joke! I still have good eyes and I don't need spectacles to take a good look at people! You're being watched, there's no doubt about that, and you will do well if you put a few police on the track of these spies!"

"I promise you I will, Grad," I replied, to satisfy the old lady, "and with the help of one of my detectives I shall soon know what to make of these suspicious characters."

In my heart I did not take her communication seriously.

I added, however:

"When I go out I will take more notice of the passers-by."

"That will be wise, sir!"

As Grad was always easily alarmed, I don't know why, I did not want to attach importance to her statement.

"If I see them again," she went on, "I will warn you, sir, before you set foot outside."

"Very well!"

And I put an end to the conversation, being quite sure that if it went on Grad would

wind up by assuring me that it was Beelzebub and one of his satellites who were after me.

The two next days it was obvious that no one was watching me either when I went out or when I came in. So I concluded that Grad was mistaken.

But on the morning of June 22nd, Grad climbed up the stairs as fast as her age permitted, thrust open the door of my room and, almost out of breath, exclaimed:

"Master, master——"

"What is the matter, Grad?"

"They are there!"

"Who are?" I asked, thinking of anything rather than the "net weaving" of which I was the object.

"The two spies!"

"Oh, yes, those famous spies."

"Their very selves—in the street, opposite your windows, watching the house, waiting for you to go out!"

I went to the window, and raising the curtain very gently, so as not to give them a hint, I saw two men on the pavement.

Really two, of middle height, stoutly built, with broad shoulders, about thirty-five to forty years of age, and dressed as people from the country usually are, with felt hats shading their heads, trousers of some thick woollen

material, stout boots, and sticks in their hands.

There was no doubt they were watching the door and windows of my house most pertinaciously.

After exchanging a few words they walked ten or a dozen steps along the pavement and came back to their post again.

"These really are the same individuals that you have noticed before, Grad?" I asked.

"Yes, I am quite sure, sir!"

Of course, it was impossible for me to believe any longer that my old servant had made a mistake, and I resolved to clear the matter up. As for following these men myself, no, certainly not! They would have recognised me at once, and it would not have been the least use to speak to them direct. This very day I would have a policeman on duty in front of the house, and if they came back in the evening, or next day, they should be shadowed in their turn. They should be followed wherever it might please them to go, and in the end their identity would be established.

Were they waiting now to escort me to the police station? That is what I meant to find out, and if they did, I might have the

opportunity to offer them a hospitality for which they would not thank us.

I took my hat and, while Grad remained near the window, I went downstairs, opened the door and stepped into the street.

The two men were not there.

But their description, graven on my memory, would never be erased from it.

In spite of all the attention I concentrated on it I could not see them.

What is more, from that day onwards neither Grad nor I saw them before the house again, and I did not come across them as I went about.

After all, perhaps, and granting that I had been the object of espionage, they knew all that they wanted to know about me, now that they had seen me with their own eyes, and I ended by attaching no more importance to this incident than I had attached to the letter with the initials "M.O.T.W."

And now public curiosity was challenged once more and in circumstances that were really extraordinary.

It is well to relate in the first place that the newspapers had discontinued entertaining their readers with the subject of the Great Eyry phenomena, since these had not been manifested again. There was an equal silence

on the subject of the automobile and the vessel, of which our best detectives had failed to find any trace. And it is exceedingly probable that all this would have been entirely forgotten if a new event had not recalled these previous incidents to memory.

Thousands of people read the following article published by the *Evening Star* in its issue dated June 22nd, and reproduced the following day by all the newspapers in the United States:

"Lake Kirdall, situated in Kansas, eighty miles west of Topeka, the capital, is little known. It deserves to be, however, and no doubt it will be, for public attention is drawn to it in a very particular way.

"The lake, which lies in a mountainous region, does not appear to have any connection with the hydrographical system of the State. Its loss from evaporation is supplied by the rains which are abundant in this part of Kansas.

"The superficial area of Kirdall is estimated at seventy-five square miles and its level appears to be somewhat above that of the average ground level. Enclosed within its mountain frame, it can only be reached with difficulty by way of narrow gorges. Nevertheless, a few villages have been built upon

its shores. It supplies fish in great abundance, and fishing boats furrow its surface in every direction.

"It should be added that the depth of Kirdall varies greatly. Near the banks it is not less than fifty feet. The rims of this vast basin are formed by almost perpendicular rocks. The billows stirred up by the wind sometimes break upon its shores with absolute fury, and its lakeside habitations are drenched with spray as by a tropical downpour. Its waters, which are deep near the shore, are deeper still towards the middle, where in some places soundings have given a depth of as much as three hundred feet.

"The water of this lake is clear and fresh. Naturally, no kinds of salt water fish are found there, but pike, perch, trout, carp, gudgeon, eels and so forth exist in prodigious quantity and of a most uncommon size.

"It will be readily believed, therefore, that the Kirdall fishing is highly profitable and popular. The population engaged in the fishing industry cannot be worth less than several thousands, and their boats than several hundreds. In addition to this fleet there are a score or so of little schooners and steam launches which supply the lake and form the means of communication between the different

villages. On the other side of the mountain enclosure the railway system is in operation and facilitates the marketing of this industry in Kansas and the neighbouring States.

"This description of Kirdall is necessary to the proper comprehension of the facts which we are about to report."

And this is what the *Evening Star* had to tell in this sensational article:

"For some time past the fishermen have noticed a disturbance on the surface of the lake which they could not explain. Sometimes it surges up as if under the influence of a ground swell. Even when there is no breeze, in calm weather, and under a cloudless sky, this upheaval occurs in the midst of a mass of foam. Sometimes the little craft are so tossed about, so shaken by rolling and pitching, that they are unable to keep their course. They are driven against one another and threaten to capsize, and serious damage is the result.

"What is quite certain is that the disturbance of the water originates in the low levels of the lake, a phenomenon for which a variety of explanations have been sought.

"First of all it was suggested that this disturbance was due to some earth movement causing modifications in the bottom

of the lake under the influence of earthquake forces. But this theory had to be rejected when it was recognised that the disturbance was not localised, was but diffused over the entire area of Kirdall, east and west, north and south, in the centre and near the shore, successively, almost, one might say, regularly, which excluded all idea of earthquake or volcanic action.

"A different explanation was soon proposed. Was it some marine monster which threw the waters of Kirdall into such violent commotion? But unless the monster in question was born there, and had grown to gigantic proportions, it must have come from outside and made its way into the lake. But Kirdall has no communication with outside. As for the existence of subterranean canals, fed by the rivers of Kansas, that theory has not borne investigation. Again, if this State was situated near the seaboard of the Atlantic, the Pacific, or the Gulf of Mexico! But no, it is central, and at a great distance from the American seas.

"In short, the question does not seem an easy one to solve, and it is easier to reject ideas which are manifestly absurd than to ascertain the exact truth.

"Now, if it has been proved that the presence of a monster in Kirdall is not possible, might it not rather be a question of a submarine manœuvring in the depths of the lake? Are there not a number of mechanical devices of the sort nowadays? To give an instance, was not an invention called the *Protector* launched at Bridgeport, in Connecticut, a few years ago, which was able to navigate on the water and under the water, and also to travel on land? Constructed by an inventor of the name of Lake, and furnished with two engines, one electric of seventy-five horse-power driving twin screws the other a petrol engine, of two hundred and fifty horse-power, it was provided in addition with cast-iron wheels measuring a metre in diameter, by means of which it was enabled to move along the roads as at the bottom of the sea.

"So far, so good; but even if we grant that the disturbance observed may be caused by the movement of a submergible vessel of the Lake type, but brought to a much higher degree of perfection, the question still remains: How was it able to get into Lake Kirdall? By what underground way did it arrive there? As we have said before, this lake is completely surrounded by a ring of

mountains, and is as inaccessible to a vessel as it is to any marine monster.

"There seems to be no answer to such an objection. Nevertheless, the only admissible theory is that is a machine of this sort which is moving about beneath the waters of Kirdall, and which, further, has never been seen at the surface.

"What is more, doubt on the subject is no longer possible after what occurred on June 20th last.

"On that day, in the afternoon, the schooner *Markel*, while steering north-west under full sail, came into collision with an object which was floating under water. There are no reefs at this spot, where the lead gives a depth of eighty to ninety feet.

"The schooner, which was struck on the port side, was in danger of filling and foundering in a few minutes. The crew, however, succeeded in fothering the leak and bringing the ship to the nearest harbour, which was three miles away.

"When the *Markel* had been unloaded and hauled up on to the beach, the damage, outside and in, was examined, and everything went to show that the schooner had been regularly rammed in the hull.

"Now, in face of this fact, it is impossible

to deny the presence of a submarine in the waters of Kirdall, where it moves at an exceedingly high speed.

"But then, there is occasion to make this remark: granting that a machine of this nature has succeeded in gaining entrance to the interior of the lake, what has it come there to do? Is that the place particularly favourable for such experiments? And why does it never rise to the surface, and what is its object in remaining unknown?"

The *Evening Star* article ended with this really strange summing up:

"After the mysterious automobile, the mysterious vessel.

"After the mysterious vessel, the mysterious submarine.

"Are we to conclude that all three owe their existence to the same inventor, and that all three are really only one and the same machine?"

VIII

AT ANY COST

This article had all the tremendous effect of a revelation, received, one might almost say, by universal consent. With the natural propensity of the human mind for the extraordinary, often, even, for the impossible, no one would hear of any further doubt. It was not only the same inventor: it was the same invention as well.

And yet, in actual practice, how could this transformation possibly be effected, of an automobile into a boat, and of the boat into a submarine? A locomotive machine capable of travelling on land, on water, and under water! Well, all it wanted now was to be able to fly through space!

But in sober truth, without going beyond what was known, what was definitely established, beyond the facts which had been confirmed by a number of witnesses, the matter must be regarded as utterly marvellous. So the public, who had lost all interest already in the late events, suddenly had a fresh access of curiosity.

At the very outset the newspapers made this very just remark: even admitting that there were three distinct machines, they were all worked by an engine of a power greater than that of any engine known. That engine had given proof of its quality, and what proof, seeing that it gave a speed of a mile and a half a minute!

Very well then, it was necessary to purchase his system from the creator of this machine at any cost. Whether the system were applied to three separate machines, or to one single one able to travel in such entirely different mediums, was a point of no importance. The matter which had to be concluded was the purchase of the engine which gave such results, and the acquisition of the entire rights of its use.

Obviously, moreover, the other Powers would leave no stone unturned to become the possessors of an engine which would be so valuable to army and navy alike. The advantages on sea and on land which a nation would derive from it were obvious! How could its destructive effect be prevented when it could not be overtaken? So it was necessary to secure the ownership of it, and America could not put her millions to a better use than in bidding for it.

Such was the argument of the official world and of the populace as well. The public prints exhausted themselves in articles about this palpitating subject. And it was a matter of certainty that Europe would not lag behind the United States in such circumstances.

But before the invention could be bought it was necessary to find the inventor, and there the real difficulty began. Lake Kirdall had been ransacked and its waters sounded in vain. Did that mean that the submarine was perambulating its deeps no longer? In that case, how had it gone away? Come to that, how had it got there? The problem was insoluble! And then it did not show itself anywhere, even as the automobile did not show itself on the roads of the United States, or the boat in the American seas!

On several occasions, when calling upon Mr. Ward, I had had conversations with him about this affair, which did not fail to absorb his attention. Should the police continue inquiries, which had been void of result so far, or should they not?

Well, on the morning of June 27th I was sent for to the police station, and directly I entered his room Mr. Ward said to me:

"Well, Strock, would not this be an excellent opportunity for you to have your revenge?"

"My revenge for the Great Eyry?"

"Exactly."

"What opportunity?" I inquired, not being quite sure if my chief was speaking seriously.

"Why," he said, "wouldn't you like to discover the inventor of this treble-barrelled machine?"

"You may be quite sure of that, sir," I answered. "Just give me the order to set to work, and I will achieve the impossible in order to succeed! It is true I expect it will be difficult."

"Very, Strock; more difficult perhaps than getting inside the Great Eyry!"

It was plain—to use a slang phrase—that Mr. Ward enjoyed "pulling my leg" about my late commission. However, he always did it without malice and rather with the intention of spurring me on. Besides, he knew me, and knew that I would have given all the world to retrieve my failure. I was only waiting fresh instructions.

Mr. Ward then said to me in the friendliest way:

"I know, Strock, that you did everything in your power, and I have no fault to find with you. But it is not a question now of the Great Eyry. Whenever the Government makes a point of forcing that enclosure it

will be content to disregard expense, and with a few thousand dollars it will get all it wants."

"That is my opinion."

"However," Mr. Ward went on, "I think that it is more expedient to lay hands upon the eccentric gentleman who has eluded us so persistently! That is a job for the police, and for good police, too!"

"The reports have made no new mention of him?"

"No, and although there is every reason to suppose that he was manœuvring under the waters of Lake Kirdall, it has been impossible to pick up his trail. It's enough to make one ask whether this Proteus of machinery has not got the power of making himself invisible as well!"

"Anyhow, even if he hasn't," I answered, "it is probable that he only allows himself to be seen when it suits him."

"Quite so, Strock, and in my opinion there is only one way to make an end of this queer fellow: that is to offer him such a price for his machine that he can't refuse to sell it!"

Mr. Ward was right. And so it was in this direction that the Government intended to attempt to get into negotiation with this "hero of the day"—and never did mortal man deserve that appellation more justly!

With the assistance of the press the extraordinary individual would not fail to learn what was wanted of him. He would know the exceptional terms upon which he was asked to part with his secret.

"And in real earnest," said Mr. Ward in conclusion, "what personal use could this invention be to him? Would he not have everything to gain by making a profit by it? There is no reason to suppose that this unknown person is a criminal who, thanks to his machine, could defy pursuit!"

However, according to what my chief had just said to me, it had been decided at headquarters to adopt other measures to ensure success. The watch kept by numerous police over the roads, rivers, streams, lakes, and adjacent seas had produced no result at all. And but for the one contingency, which, after all, was not impossible, of the inventor having perished with his machine in the course of some dangerous manœuvre, the fact of his not being seen again meant that he did not intend to let himself be seen. Since the mishap to the schooner *Markel* on Lake Kirdall, no news had reached the police station, and the matter had not advanced a single stage. So Mr. Ward told me again, and he scarcely tried to conceal his disappointment.

Yes; disappointment, and defeat, and difficulties, daily growing greater, in the way of making the public safety sure! Go and chase criminals when they are beyond the power of apprehension on land and sea! Go and chase them under water! And when dirigible balloons have attained the highest degree of perfection, go and chase bandits through space! And at last I asked myself whether a day would not come when my colleagues and I would be reduced to impotent inactivity, and when all police officers would be finally pensioned off as useless.

Just at this moment I remembered the letter I had received ten days or so before—the letter dated from the Great Eyry, which threatened my liberty, and even my life, if I should make another attempt! I remembered, too, the strange espionage of which I had been the object. No other letter of the kind had reached me since. There had been no fresh meeting with the two suspicious individuals. The vigilant Grad, ever on the watch, had not seen them again before the house.

I wondered if it would not be better to take Mr. Ward into my confidence. But, on reflection, the Great Eyry affair had ceased to interest. Another had almost effaced its

memory. It was quite likely that the country folk in the district hardly gave it a thought, since the phenomena which had excited their alarm had not been renewed, and they were able to devote themselves in peace to their usual occupations.

So I decided only to report the letter to my chief if circumstances required me to do so by-and-by. Besides, he would have seen in it only the tomfoolery of some silly practical joker.

Resuming the conversation, which had been interrupted for a few minutes, Mr. Ward said to me:

"We mean to try to get into communication with this inventor, and to negotiate with him. He has vanished, it is true, but there is no reason why he should not reappear some day, and why his presence should not be noticed somewhere on American territory. You are the man, Strock, whom we have selected, and you are to hold yourself ready to start without an hour's delay at the earliest notice. Do not go out, except to the police station, where you will receive our final instructions if occasion arises."

"I will obey, sir," I replied, "and I shall be ready to leave Washington for anywhere at the first signal. But there is one question

I must ask you: am I to act alone, or would it not be better to give me assistance?"

"That is what I propose," Mr. Ward broke in. "Choose two of the police in whom you have complete confidence."

"That will be easy, sir. And, now if some day I find our man before me, what am I to do?"

"Keep him in sight first of all, and if need be secure his person, for you will be provided with a warrant for arrest."

"A wise precaution, sir. If he were to jump upon his automobile and shoot off at the rate you know of—well, try, yourself, to catch a merry man who goes two hundred and forty in the hour!"

"Well, he must not be able to go them, Strock, and when you have made the arrest, send a telegram. We will attend to the rest."

"You may rely upon me, sir. I will be ready to start with my men any hour of the day or night. I am grateful to you for having trusted me with this piece of work, which, if successful, will bring me great credit."

"And great profit," added my chief, as he took leave of me.

When I got home I busied myself with preparations for a journey which might last for some time. Grad may have imagined

that there was some idea of my going back to the Great Eyry, and everybody knows what she thought of that place. However, she made no remark to me, and I preferred not to take her into my confidence, although I had every faith in her.

With regard to the two police officers who were to accompany me, my choice was made in advance. Both belonged to the investigation department, were aged thirty and thirty-two respectively, and both had given proof of their energy, their intelligence, and their courage on many occasions when acting under me. One, John Hart, hailed from Illinois; the other, Nab Walker, from Massachusetts. I could not have had a better hand.

Several days passed. There was no news of the automobile, the boat, or the submarine. What little information reached the police was discovered to be false, and was not worth following up. As for the newspaper gossip, that was utterly worthless, and everybody knows that even the best informed papers must always be taken with caution.

On two cocasions, however, it was beyond doubt that the "man of the moment" had shown himself again, the first time on one of the Arkansas roads, near Little Rock, the

second time in the southern waters of Lake Superior.

But the puzzling part of the matter was that the first appearance took place in the afternoon of June 26th, and the second in the evening of the same day. The distance between these two points is not less than eight hundred miles, and if with its incredible speed the automobile could cover this journey in practically no time, still something ought to have been seen of it as it went through Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, and Wisconsin.

In point of fact it was only by land, and by no other way, that the chauffeur could have made the journey, and yet he was not observed anywhere on the road.

The thing was unintelligible, as everyone will admit, and the plain truth is that nobody could make anything of it.

For the rest, after its twofold reappearance, on the Little Rock road and near the shore of Lake Superior, nothing more had been seen of it. So there was no occasion for me and my men to make a move.

As I have said, the Government would have liked to get into communication with the mysterious individual. But they had to give up all idea of seizing his person and achieve their object by other means. What

mattered most, and what the public were more particularly anxious about, was that the United States should become the sole owner of a machine which would secure to the Republic an indisputable supremacy over other countries, especially in case of war. It was believed, moreover, that the inventor must be of American origin, since he only showed himself upon American territory, and that he would doubtless prefer to negotiate with America.

The following advertisement appeared in all the newspapers of the United States on July 3rd. It was worded in the most formal terms, as will be seen:

"In the course of April, of the present year, an automobile travelled over the roads of Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Ohio, Tennessee, Missouri, and Illinois, and on May 27th, during the American Club competition, over the roads of Wisconsin; then it disappeared.

"In the course of the first week of June, a boat making a high rate of speed, scoured the sea of New England, between Cape North and Cape Sable, and more particularly within sight of Boston; then it disappeared.

"In the second fortnight of the same month, a submergible vessel manœuvred beneath the waters of Lake Kirdall, in Kansas; then it disappeared.

"Everything points to the belief that it is the same inventor who designed and created these machines, which may perhaps be but one single machine adapted to travel on land, and also to sail both on and beneath water.

"A proposal is therefore made to the aforesaid inventor, whoever he may be, to purchase the aforesaid machine.

"At the same time that he is invited to disclose his identity, he is requested to indicate the terms upon which he would be willing to negotiate with the American Government, and to forward his reply as soon as possible to the Police Station, Washington, District of Columbia, United States of America."

Such was the advertisement printed in large letters in the papers. It could not fail to catch the eye of the interested party, wherever he might be, before very long. He would read it, and could not fail to reply to it one way or the other, and why should he refuse such an offer?

There was nothing to do but wait for the answer.

The fever of curiosity which seized the general public may be imagined. From morn till eve an eager, noisy crowd surged around the police station, awaiting the arrival of a letter or telegram. The reporters never

left their post. What kudos, what a scoop, for the paper which should be the first to publish the famous news! At last to know the style and title of the indiscoverable unknown, and if he were willing to enter into communication with the Government! Needless to say, America would do things handsomely. She has no lack of millions, and, if need be, her millionaires would open their purses wide.

A day went by. To how many nervous and impatient people did it seem to contain far more than four-and-twenty hours, each hour made up of far more than sixty minutes!

No reply, no letter, no telegram. The next night, still nothing new. And so it went on for three whole days more!

Then what had been anticipated occurred. The cables had told Europe what America proposed to do. The various Powers of the Old World would benefit as greatly as she would from this invention. Why not dispute with her for the possession of a machine from which such great advantages were to be derived? Why not take a hand in this war of millions?

And indeed the great Powers intended to take a hand in it: France, England, Russia, Italy, Austria, Germany. It was only the second-rate Powers which made no attempt

to join the battle. The European newspapers published advertisements identical with that of the United States. And it actually rested only with the extraordinary "chauffeur" whether he should become a rival of the Goulds, the Morgans, the Astors, the Vanderbilts, and the Rothschilds of France, England and Austria!

And since the gentleman in question made no sign, firm offers were made to him to solve the mystery which surrounded him. The entire world became a public market, a universal exchange where absolutely incredible bids were made. Twice a day the papers gave the latest quotation, which went on rising steadily by millions!

Finally, it was the United States which, after a memorable session of Congress, carried a vote of twenty million dollars—that is, four millions sterling.

Well, there was not a single citizen of the United States to be found, no matter in what class of society, who considered that figure too high, so enormous was the importance attached to the possession of this marvellous locomotive machine. I myself was the very first to say, and to say over and over again, to my excellent Grad that "it was worth more than that!"

No doubt the other nations were not of the same opinion, for their bids stopped below this figure. And then there broke out all the gibes of defeated rivalry. The inventor would not make himself known . . . He does not exist . . . He never has existed . . . He is a hoaxer in the grand manner . . . Besides, who knows if he has not perished with his machine, at the foot of some precipice, or been swallowed in the depths of the sea? The press of the Old World got its own back handsomely.

Unluckily, time was going on. There was no news of our man, no reply from him. He had not been reported again anywhere. He had not been seen since his manœuvres on the waters of Lake Superior.

For my own part, not knowing what to think, I began to lose all hope of a solution of this strange affair.

But on the morning of July 15th, an unstamped letter was found in the letter box at the police station.

After the authorities had taken note of it, it was communicated to the Washington newspapers, which published it in a special edition, reproduced in facsimile.

It was in the following terms:

IX

THE SECOND LETTER

"On board the *Terrible*, July 15th.

"To the Old and the New Worlds.

"The proposals which have emanated from the various Powers of Europe, like those which have been made in the last place by the United States of America, may look for no other reply than this present one:

"It is an absolute and definite refusal of the terms offered for the purchase of my machine,

"This invention shall be neither French, nor German, nor Austrian, nor Russian, nor English, nor American.

"The machine will remain my property, and I shall make use of it in the way I think fit.

"With it I have complete power over the whole world, and there is no human power capable of withstanding it in any circumstances whatsoever.

"Let no attempt be made to take possession of it. It is, and will remain, beyond all reach. The injury that may be attempted to be done to me I will repay a hundredfold.

"As for the price that is offered to me, I treat it with contempt; I have no need of it. Besides, any day that it might please me to have millions, or billions, I should only have to reach out my hand to take them.

"Let the Old World and the New World know they are powerless against me, and I am all-powerful against them.

"And this letter I sign:

"MASTER OF THE WORLD."

X

OUTLAWED

SUCH were the terms of the letter addressed to the Government of the United States, and delivered at the police station without the assistance of the post office. As for the individual who brought it during the night of July 14th-15th, no one had caught a glimpse of him.

And yet a considerable number of restless people thronged the approaches to the police station between sunset and sunrise. It is true they would have had some difficulty in seeing the bearer of the letter—perhaps it was the writer of it—slinking along the pavement and dropping it into the letter box, for it was night and the moon was new. One could not see across the street.

As I have said, the letter was reproduced in facsimile in the newspapers, to which the authorities communicated it at the first possible moment. But it must not be supposed that the first impression it conveyed was "That is the work of some poor kind of jester!"

No; it is true that was the impression I formed when I received the Great Eyry

letter five weeks before. But, to be honest, did it still hold good in my own mind? Had it not been modified somewhat by reflection? However this may be, I felt it with less confidence now, and I really was at a loss what to think.

And besides, this was not the idea which prevailed at Washington or anywhere else in the United States: as was only natural, after all. So when anyone contended that the letter ought not to be taken seriously, the general inclination was for the large majority to reply immediately:

"That isn't the work of any hoaxer! The man who wrote it is certainly the man who invented the machine!"

The writing of the letter, which I examined minutely and constantly, was made up of words inscribed with a thick pen. A graphologist* would certainly have found in these few lines proofs of a violent temper and a character far from agreeable.

Then a cry escaped my lips, a cry which Grad fortunately did not hear. How had I failed to see before the resemblance between the handwriting of this letter and of the one which I had received from Morganton?

And then—still more significant—the initials with which the letter was signed, were

* One who tells character from handwriting.

they not the initials of the four words "Master of the World"? And where was this new letter written? On board the *Terrible*. That name, of course, was the name of the triple machine commanded by this most wondrous captain!

So they were from his hand, these words, as were the words of that first letter which threatened me if I dared renew my attempt upon the Great Eyry!

I got up, took the letter of June 13th from my desk, and compared it with the facsimile in the newspaper. No further doubt was possible! It was the same remarkable writing and came from the same hand!

And then, with my brain working rapidly, I tried to realise the consequences of this coincidence which was known to myself alone, of this identity of the handwriting of the two letters, the author of which could be no other than the commander of this *Terrible*—a terrible name, which was only too well justified.

And then I asked myself if this coincidence would allow us to resume our inquiries under conditions of less uncertainty. Should we be able to set our men loose upon a stronger scent, which would bring them up to the quarry? What, in short, was the relation

between the *Terrible* and the Great Eyry? What was the connection between the phenomena of the Blue Ridge and the no less phenomenal appearances of this grotesque machine?

I did all that I had to do, and then, putting the letter in my pocket, I went to the police station.

I inquired if Mr. Ward was in his room. Receiving a reply in the affirmative I hurried to his door, and on the words "Come in," sprang breathlessly to his desk.

Mr. Ward had the letter published by the newspapers before him at the moment, not the facsimile, but the actual original, which had been dropped into the letter box at the station.

"You have some fresh information, Strock?"

"Judge for yourself, sir!"

I had taken the letter with the initials from my pocket.

Mr. Ward took it, looked at the first page, and before reading it said:

"What is this?"

"A letter, signed with initials, as you can see."

"Where was it posted?"

"At the Morganton office, in North Carolina."

"When did you receive it?"

"On June 13th last—about a month ago."

"What was your first opinion of it?"

"That it was written by a practical joker."

"And now, Strock——"

"Now I think what you will doubtless think, sir, when you have taken cognizance of it."

My chief picked up the letter again, and read it to the end.

"It has four initials as signature," he remarked.

"Yes, sir, and those initials are the initials of the words 'Master of the World' in the facsimile."

"Of which this is the original," Mr. Ward replied as he rose.

"It is obvious," I added, "that the two letters are in the same hand."

"The same hand, Strock."

"You see, sir, the threats made to me if I make a second attempt to get inside the Great Eyry."

"Yes, threats of death! But, Strock, it's a month since you received that letter. Why did you not show it to me before?"

"Because I did not attach any importance to it. To-day, after the one that has come from the *Terrible*, I am obliged to take it seriously."

"I quite agree, Strock. I think the matter

is serious, and I am asking myself whether we ought not to put ourselves on the track of this strange individual."

"I have asked myself that, too, sir."

"But—what connection can there be between the *Terrible* and the Great Eyry?"

"I don't know, and I can't guess the answer to that."

"There could only be one explanation," Mr. Ward went on, "a far-fetched one, indeed, perhaps impossible."

"And that is——?"

"That the Great Eyry actually was the place chosen by the inventor for the storage of his material!"

"Bless my soul!" I exclaimed. "And how would he get in? And get out? From what I have seen, sir, your explanation is not admissible."

"Unless, Strock——"

"Unless what?" I echoed.

"Unless the Master of the World's machine has got wings as well, which would enable it to go and roost in the Great Eyry!"

I could not restrain a sharp movement of unbelief at the idea of the *Terrible* being able to compete with the vultures and the eagles, and surely Mr. Ward was not serious in his suggestion.

He had picked up the two letters and was comparing them again; he was examining the handwriting through a small magnifying glass and noting their exact resemblance. Not only the same hand, but the same pen had written them. And then, the coincidence between the initials of the one and the "Master of the World" of the other!

After a few moments' reflection, Mr. Ward said to me:

"I will keep your letter, Strock, and I certainly think you are destined to play an important part in this quaint affair! What the link is between them I cannot guess, but it is my opinion that a link exists. You were mixed up in the first affair, and it won't be surprising if you are mixed up in the second."

"I hope I may be, sir, and that ought not to surprise you, coming from one so inquisitive——"

"As you are, Strock! That's a bargain and I can only say again, hold yourself ready to start at the first signal."

I left the police station under the impression that it would be only a very short time before I was appealed to for my assistance. My two men and I would be off in less than an hour; Mr. Ward might be quite sure of that.

Public excitement had risen steadily higher since the refusal of the captain of the *Terrible* to accept the offer of the American Government. Both at White House and at the Ministry, it was felt that public opinion demanded action, but what sort of action? Where was the Master of the World to be found, and, if he reappeared anywhere, how was his person to be secured? There was always something baffling in his case. That his machine was possessed of prodigious speed was beyond all question. But how had it been able to effect an entrance into Lake Kirdall, which had no communication with the outside? And how had it got out? Then, to wind up, it had just been reported on the surface of Lake Superior, and, as I said before, without having been seen anywhere along the eight-hundred-mile length of road which separates the two lakes!

What a business! All the more reason to probe it to the bottom. Since the millions of dollars had failed, recourse must be had to force. The inventor and his invention were not for sale, and it has been shown in what haughty and menacing terms he worded his refusal. All right! He should be considered a criminal against whom all measures were legitimate, which should put

it out of his power to do injury! Public safety, not only in America, but in the entire world, required it. The hope that he might have perished in some catastrophe could no longer be accepted after his famous letter of the last 15th of July. He was alive, very much alive, and his life constituted a public danger, a danger every moment!

Influenced by these thoughts, the Government issued the following official advertisement:

"Since the commander of the *Terrible* refuses to negotiate for the surrender of his secret, even on the basis of the millions which were offered, and since the use to which he puts his machine constitutes a peril against which it is impossible to make provision, the said commander is outlawed. All measures which may end in the destruction of his machine and of himself are sanctioned in advance."

It was declaration of war, of war to the death against this Master of the World, who thought himself strong enough to brave an entire nation—the American nation!

After this date rewards of a considerable amount were promised to whosoever would discover the retreat of this dangerous individual, to whosoever should succeed in

securing his person, and to whosoever should rid the country of him.

Such was the situation during the last fortnight of July. Did it not seem to calm reflection that only chance could unravel it? It was not when it was an automobile on land, or a boat on water, or a submarine under water, that the machine could be seized. No; it was indispensable that it should be taken by surprise before it succeeded in making its escape, thanks to its speed, which no locomotive engine could equal.

So I was on the alert, waiting an order from Mr. Ward to start with my men. And the order did not come, for the excellent reason that the person whom it concerned remained invisible.

The end of the month of July was drawing near. The newspapers continued to entertain their readers with the affair. Sometimes fresh information was forthcoming which raised public excitement to fever point. New clues were pointed out. But, in sum, there was nothing of importance. Telegrams crossed one another over the entire extent of the country, all contradictory and mutually destructive. It is well known that the offer of enormous rewards cannot fail to lead to mistakes, even made in good faith. One day

it was the car which went by like a whirlwind. Another, it was the boat which had just appeared on one of the lakes, which are so numerous in America. Then it was the submarine manœuvring near the shore. actually, it was nothing but the active imagination of minds, over-excited and nervous, which saw all these apparitions through the magnifying glasses of the rewards!

At last, on July 29th, I received a summons from my chief to go to his room without a moment's delay.

Twenty minutes later I was in his presence.

"You must be off in an hour, Strock," he said.

"For——?"

"Toledo."

"He has been seen?"

"Yes; you will get particulars there."

"We shall be on our way in an hour, my men and I."

"Good, Strock, and I order you officially——"

"To do what, sir?"

"To succeed—this time—to succeed!"

XI

IN THE FIELD

So the elusive captain had just made his reappearance in United States territory. He had not shown himself on the roads or seas of Europe. He had not crossed the Atlantic, whose entire expanse it would have taken him less than four days to cover. Was it only America then that he made the stage for his experiments, and was the conclusion to be drawn from that, that he was an American?

The officer to whom I was referred with an authority from Mr. Ward was named Arthur Wells, and he was awaiting me at Toledo.

As I have said, our preparations for a start had been made some time already. Three small valises were all our luggage, in anticipation of the possible extension of our absence. John Hart and Nab Walker were provided with pocket revolvers. So, too, was I. Who was to say that we might not have to attack, or even defend ourselves?

The town of Toledo is built at the extreme point of Lake Erie, whose waters lave the northern boundary of Ohio. The express, in which three seats had been reserved for

us, passed through Eastern Virginia and Ohio during the night. We met with nothing to delay us, and at eight o'clock in the morning the train pulled up in Toledo station.

Arthur Wells was waiting for us on the platform. Having been notified of the coming of Chief-Inspector Strock, he was most anxious, he said, to meet me, and I returned the compliment.

I had hardly put foot to the ground when I detected my man, who was busy scanning the faces of the passengers.

I went up to him.

"Mr. Wells?" said I.

"Mr. Strock?" he replied.

"Myself."

"At your service," Mr. Wells added.

"Do we stay any time in Toledo?" I inquired.

"No, by your leave, Mr. Strock. A brake, with a pair of good horses, is in the station yard, and we must start at once if we are to be at the place before evening."

"We will come with you," I replied, nodding to my two men to follow us. "Have we far to go?"

"About twenty miles."

"What is the name of the place?"

"Black Rock creek."

The carriage took us to the White Hotel, and after a hurried breakfast, at ten o'clock we were on our way.

The brake held four people besides the driver. In its lockers were provisions which would last us for several days if necessary.

Black Rock creek is an absolutely deserted spot, frequented neither by the natives of the neighbouring country nor by fishermen, and it could have supplied us with nothing. There is not an inn where one can get a meal, nor a room where one can sleep. We were in the middle of the hot season, July, when the sun never moderates its heat. So the temperature had no terrors for us if we should be compelled to spend a night or two in the open.

Very likely, too, if our venture were to be successful, it would be only a matter of a few hours. Either the captain of the *Terrible* would be taken by surprise before having time to escape, or he would take to flight and we should have to abandon all hope of arresting him.

Arthur Wells was a man of about forty, and was one of the best officers in the federal police. Energetic, fearless, enterprising, and possessed of great presence of mind, he had proved his quality on many an occasion,

sometimes at the risk of his life. He inspired confidence in his superiors, who had a very high opinion of him. He was engaged upon an entirely different matter in Toledo when chance put him on the track of the *Terrible*.

Urged by the driver's whip, the brake rolled rapidly along the shore of Lake Erie towards its south-western point. This vast sheet of water is situated between the Canadian territory on the north and the States of Ohio, Pennyslvania, and New York. If I go into details about the geographical situation of this lake, its depth, its area, the water courses that supply it, and the channels by which its overflow escapes, it is because these are material to the story which follows.

The area of Lake Erie is as much as eleven thousand square miles. Its height is about six hundred feet above sea level. On the north-west it communicates with Lake Huron, Lake St. Clair, and the Detroit river, all of which send their waters into it, and it has tributaries of less importance, such as the Rocky, the Guyahoga, and the Black rivers. It finds its outlet in the north-east into Lake Ontario, between the shores of the famous Niagara Falls.

The greatest depth that has been found in Lake Erie is one hundred and thirty-five feet.

It will be seen how considerable is the volume of its waters. To conclude, this is pre-eminently the region of those superb lakes of which there is a chain between the Canadian territory and the United States of America.

In this region, although it is situated below the fortieth degree of latitude, the climate is very cold in the winter, and the currents from the Arctic regions sweep down upon it, their course unimpeded, with terrific violence. Consequently, it is not surprising that the entire surface of Lake Erie is frozen over every year from November until April.*

The principal towns upon the shores of the mighty lake are Buffalo, which belongs to the State of New York, and Toledo, on the east and west respectively.

The brake followed a winding road, which corresponded with the many indentions of the shore.

While the driver urged his team forward at a fast trot, I conversed with Arthur Wells, and so was made acquainted with the circumstances which had been the cause of his telegram to the headquarters of the police at Washington.

Forty-eight hours before, in the afternoon

* On April 12, 1867, the author was at Buffalo when the whole of Lake Erie was ice-bound.

of July 27th, Wells was riding towards the little town of Hearley, and was crossing a little wood about five miles from that place, when he caught sight of a submarine rising to the surface of the lake. He stopped, dismounted, and from the shelter of a thicket saw, saw with his own eyes, this submarine come to a stop at the far end of Black Rock creek. Was it the machine which defied capture that had just emerged and come alongside—the machine of the Boston seas, the machine of Lake Kirdall?

When the submarine was at the foot of the rocks, two men jumped on to the beach. Was one of them that Master of the World, of whom nothing more had been heard since his last disappearance on Lake Superior? And was this the mysterious *Terrible* rising from the depths of Lake Erie?

"I was alone," said Wells, "alone at the end of the creek. If you had been there with your men, Mr. Strock, four against two, we could have had a try at apprehending these men before they could have got aboard again and taken to flight."

"Of course," I answered. "But were there any more of them on board? But never mind; if those two had been caught we might perhaps have found out who they were."

"And especially," Wells added, "if one of the two was the captain of the *Terrible*."

"I am only afraid of one thing, Wells, that this vessel, whatever it may be, may have left the creek since you came away."

"We shall soon know, and may heaven send that we find it there! Then, at nightfall——"

"But you did not stay in the little wood until evening, did you?" I asked.

"No; I left about five o'clock, and in the evening arrived at Toledo, where I sent a telegram to Washington."

"Did you return to Black Rock creek yesterday?"

"Yes."

"The submarine was still there?"

"At the same spot."

"And the two men?"

"And the two men also. I think they had come to this lonely spot to repair some injury."

"That is quite likely," said I; "an injury which prevented them from getting back to their usual retreat. I hope it may be so!"

"I've got reason for thinking so, because some of their material and plant had been put out on the beach, and as far as I could gather without giving them the alarm, they seemed to be at work on board."

"These two men only?"

"That is all."

"But is that a large enough crew to work a tremendously fast machine, which is sometimes an automobile, and sometimes a boat or a submarine?"

"I don't think it is, Mr. Strock. But to-day again I have only seen the two men of the day before. They came several times to the copse where I lay hid, and cut some branches and lighted a fire on the sand. This creek is so deserted that they could not meet anyone there, and they must know that."

"Would you recognise them again?"

"Oh, yes, perfectly; one is of middle height, strongly built, with hard features and a full beard; the other is a thick-set, smaller man. I left again about five o'clock, as I had done the day before. When I got to Toledo I received a telegram from Mr. Ward, telling me you were coming, and I went to the station to meet you."

The precise fact, then, which emerged was that for the last thirty-six hours the submarine had been in port in Black Rock creek, probably for necessary repairs, and perhaps, with good luck, we should find her there still. As for the presence of the *Terrible* on Lake Erie, Arthur Wells and I agreed

that there was a natural explanation of that. The last time the machine had been seen, it was on Lake Superior. It might have covered the distance between that lake and Erie either by land, taking the Michigan roads to the western shore of the lake, or by water, following the Detroit river, perhaps even travelling under water. Its journey by road had not been reported, although the police watched that State as carefully as all the rest. So the theory remained that the automobile had been changed into a boat or submarine. Under such conditions the captain and his companions could have reached the Lake Erie waters without arousing alarm.

And now, if the *Terrible* had left the creek already, or if she escaped from us when we attempted to arrest her, would the game be up? I could not say.

I was aware that two destroyers were at this moment at Buffalo, at the far end of Erie. Before I left Washington, Mr. Ward had informed me of their presence there. A telegram to the commanders of these destroyers would be enough to put them in pursuit of the *Terrible* if necessary. But how would they make up to her in speed, and when she changed into a submarine, how would they attack her through the

waters of Lake Erie, in which she would have sought refuge? Arthur Wells agreed with me that in an unequal fight like that, the advantage would not be with the destroyers. So this very next night, if we did not succeed, our campaign would be lost!

Wells had told me that Black Rock creek was very lonely. Even the road which leads from Toledo to the little town of Hearley, a few miles farther on, turns off from it at a considerable distance. Our brake, when it arrived off the creek, would not be visible from the shore. After it had got to the edge of the wood, which screens the creek, it would be easy to find shelter under the trees. From that point, when night fell, my companions and I would set out to take up our posts in the outskirts of the wood on the Erie side, where we would have every opportunity to observe what was going on at the far end of the creek.

It should be added that Wells knew this creek well. He had visited it more than once since he had been staying at Toledo. Enclosed by almost perpendicular rocks washed by the waters of the lake, its depth around its whole circumference was about thirty feet.

Consequently, the *Terrible* could get alongside of the far end of the creek, either floating or submerged. At two or three places where there were breaches in the cliffs, the coastline fell to the level of the sandy beach which extended up to the outskirts of the little wood, two or three hundred feet distant.

It was seven o'clock when, after a halt half-way, our brake arrived at the edge of the wood. It was still too light for us to go to the brink of the creek, even under cover of the trees. It would have meant risking being seen, and supposing the machine were still at this place, it would have made all haste to take to deep water, provided of course, that its repairs were finished.

"Do we stop here?" I asked Wells, when the brake pulled up at the outskirts of the wood.

"No, Mr. Strock," he answered. "We had better pitch our camp inside. We are certain not to be tracked."

"Can the carriage make its way under these trees?"

"Yes, it can," said Wells confidently. "I have been through this wood in every direction. There is a clearing about three hundred yards away, where our horses will be able to graze. As soon as it is dark enough

we will go down on the beach to the foot of the rocks, which encloses the far end of the creek."

We had nothing to do but follow Wells' advice. And we went through the outskirts of the wood, the horses led by the bridle, my companions and myself following on foot.

Inside the wood, sea pines, evergreen oaks, and cypress trees grew in dense irregular masses. On the ground was a thick carpet of grass and dead leaves. The upper foliage of the trees was so dense that the last rays of the setting sun could not penetrate it. Of roads, even of footpaths, there was never a trace. Nevertheless, the brake arrived at the clearing in less than ten minutes, though not without the cost of a few collisions.

This clearing, surrounded by big trees, formed a kind of oval, which was clothed with verdant grass. It was still light here, and it would be an hour before the shadows invaded it. So there was plenty of time to arrange our halt and to take some rest after a journey which had been rather tiring over a road which was decidedly bumpy.

Of course, our desire to get to the creek and see if the *Terrible* was still there was extreme, but caution stayed us. A little

patience and darkness would allow us to reach the creek without running any risk of being seen. That was Wells' opinion, and I thought it best to comply.

The horses, unharnessed and set free to graze, were to remain under the custody of the driver while we were away. The lockers of the brake were opened, and John Hart and Nab Walker took out the provisions and laid them out on the grass at the foot of a magnificent cypress, which reminded me of the forest growths in the neighbourhood of Morganton and Pleasant Garden. We were both hungry and thirsty. There was plenty to eat and drink. Then we lighted our pipes while waiting for the moment to start.

Inside the wood the silence was absolute. The last piping of birds had ceased. As evening drew on the breeze gradually dropped and the leaves at the end of the highest branches scarcely quivered. The sky grew black directly the sun had set, and twilight was followed by darkness.

I looked at my watch. It showed half-past eight.

"Time, Wells——"

"Whenever you like, Mr. Strock——"

"Then let us be off."

Explicit instructions were given to the

driver not to allow his horses to stray from the pasture while we were away.

Wells took the lead, I walked behind him, followed by John Hart and Nab Walker. We should have had great difficulty in finding our way through the darkness if Wells had not acted as guide.

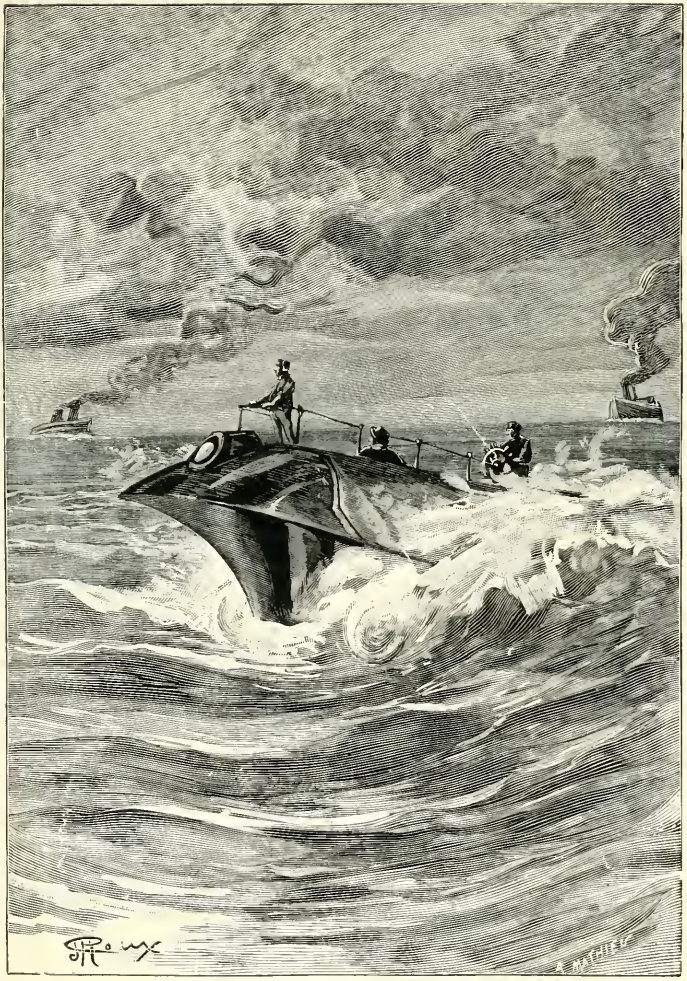
At last we were at the edge of the wood. Before us spread the beach to Black Rock creek.

The silence and the solitude were unbroken. We could expose ourselves without risk. If the *Terrible* was there, it was on the other side of the rocks that she must have her anchorage.

But was she still there? That was the question, the only question, and as the climax of this thrilling adventure approached, I confess that my heart was thumping.

Wells gave us a sign to move forward. The sand crunched under our feet. A couple of hundred yards, or less, to go, taking us only a few minutes, and we were at the mouth of one of the passes leading to the edge of the lake.

Nothing—nothing at all! The place where Wells left the *Terrible* twenty-four hours before was empty! The Master of the World was not at Black Rock creek!



A BARE MILE SEPARATED US.—Page 238.

XII

BLACK ROCK CREEK

EVERYBODY knows how prone to self-deception human nature is. Of course, there were chances that the much-sought-for machine would not be at this place any longer—granting, indeed, that it was that one which Wells had seen emerging from the water in the afternoon of the 27th. On the supposition that some injury to its triple system of locomotion had prevented it from regaining its own retreat, either by land or by water, and had compelled it to put into port at the end of Black Rock creek, what ought we to have concluded from the fact that it was not to be seen there any longer? Obviously, that it had effected repairs, had resumed its journey, and had forsaken the waters of Lake Erie.

But think of the disappointment, I may say the despair! All our campaign reduced to less than nothing at all! If the *Terrible* were afloat again, either on or under the waters of the lake, to find her again, to overtake her, to capture her, was beyond our power, and—why shut one's eyes to the fact—beyond all human power.

We stayed there quite dumbfounded, Wells and I, while John Hart and Nab Walker, as sorely vexed as we were, moved about to various points of the creek.

And yet our measures had been well taken, they had every chance of success. If, at the moment of our arrival, the two men observed by Wells had been upon the shore, we might have succeeded in crawling up to them, in surprising them and seizing them before they could have got aboard. If they had been on board, behind the rocks, we might have awaited their coming ashore, and it would have been easy to cut off their retreat. Very probably, since on both the first and the second day Wells had only seen these two men, the *Terrible* did not carry a larger crew!

That is what we had thought, and that is how we would have acted! But, as bad luck would have it, the *Terrible* was no longer there!

Posted at the far end of the pass, I exchanged but a few words with Wells. What need of words had we to understand each other? After the first vexation, anger grew upon us. After missing our blow we felt our powerlessness to go on with this campaign or to begin it all over again!

Nearly an hour went by and we had no idea of leaving the spot. Our eyes ever searched the thick darkness. Sometimes a glimmer of light quivered on the surface of the lake and then went out, and with it a hope as speedily frustrated! Sometimes, too, we thought we saw a form outline itself through the gloom—the mass of a boat that had drawn near. And sometimes eddies spread in widening circles, as if the creek had been troubled in its lowest depths! Then, almost immediately, these vague indications disappeared. They were nothing but illusion of the senses!

Presently our companions came back to us, and my first question was:

"Anything fresh?"

"Nothing," said John Hart.

"You have been all round the creek?"

"Yes," Nab Walker answered, "and we haven't even seen any trace of the plant and material which Mr. Wells observed!"

"Let us wait," said I, for I could not make up my mind to go back to the wood.

At this moment our attention was caught by a distinct agitation of the water, which spread right up to the foot of the rocks.

"It's like a choppy sea," said Wells.

"Yes," I replied, instinctively lowering

my voice. "What is it due to? The breeze has dropped completely. Is it some disturbance on the surface of the lake?"

"Or underneath?" added Wells, who was bending down in order to hear better.

There really was justification for wondering whether some vessel, whose engines might have caused this disturbance, were not making for the end of the creek.

Keeping perfectly silent and still, we tried to pierce the thick darkness, while the surf rose higher against the rocks on the shore.

John Hart and Nab Walker had clambered up to the higher slope towards the right. I crouched down to the level of the water and watched the disturbance, which did not get any less. On the contrary, it became more noticeable, and I began to perceive a kind of regular pulsation, like that produced by a screw in motion.

"Not a doubt about it," declared Wells leaning towards me. "It is a boat coming near."

"Sure!" I answered, "unless perhaps there are whales or sharks in Erie."

"No; a boat!" Wells insisted. "Is it making for the far end of the creek, or will it try to come alongside higher up?"

"This is where you saw it twice?"

"Yes, here, Mr. Strock."

"Well, if it is the same—and it must be—there is no reason why it should not come back to the same place."

"There! There!" said Wells, pointing towards the mouth of the creek.

Our companions had just rejoined us. Crouching on the edge of the beach, we all four looked in the direction indicated.

A black mass, which was moving in the midst of the shadow, could be distinguished vaguely. It advanced very slowly, and must still have been more than a cable's length to the north-east. The rumbling of its engine was almost inaudible now. Perhaps the boat had stopped its engines and was only making its own way.

So the machine was going to pass the night at the far end of the creek, as it had done the day before! Why had it left this anchorage to which it was returning now? Had it met with some fresh mishap, which prevented it from taking to the open water? Or had it found itself under the necessity of leaving before its repairs were completed? What was the reason which obliged it to come back to this spot? Or was there some imperative reason which prevented it from dashing over the Ohio roads after it had changed itself into an automobile?

Anyhow, whatever it was, the boat continued to draw near, and her captain certainly knew every inch of these Black Rock channels, seeing that he ventured in them in inky darkness. There was not a single light on board, and not a ray glimmered from inside through the portholes. Every now and then the gentle working of the engine was audible. The plashing of the backwash increased, and in a few minutes it would be "all for the quay."

If I make use of a term like that which is associated with harbours, it is not inappropriate. For, as a matter of fact, the rocks at this spot formed a platform, five or six feet above the level of the lake, providing an admirably appointed place for coming alongside.

"Don't let us stay here," said Wells, grasping my arm.

"No," I answered, "we should run a risk of being discovered. We must crouch down beside the beach, hide in some cavity and wait."

"We will follow you."

There was not a minute to be lost. The dark mass was gradually drawing nearer, and on the bridge, slightly raised above the water, could be seen the outline of two men.

Did it mean that there really were only two on board?

After having gone back along the pass, Wells and I, John Hart and Nab Walker, climbed along the rocks. There were hollow cavities among them, and in one of these I hid myself with Wells, while my two men hid in another.

If the men from the *Terrible* came down on to the shore they would not be able to see us, but we would see them, and we should have to act as circumstances decided.

From the sounds at the edge of the lake and from various words exchanged in English it was clear that the boat had just come alongside. Almost immediately a hawser was sent along to the end of the very pass which we had just left.

Crawling to the corner, Wells saw that the hawser was being hauled in by one of the sailors who had leaped ashore, and we could hear the grappling iron scraping along the ground.

A few minutes later steps crunched along the sandy shore.

Two men went up the pass and made towards the outskirts of the little wood, walking in single file and carrying a lighted lantern.

What were they going to do this side? Could it be that this Black Rock creek was a port of call for the *Terrible*? Did her captain keep a store of provisions or material there? Did he come there to revictual when the chances of his daring voyages brought him to this portion of the United States? Was he acquainted with this spot, which was so deserted, so seldom trodden by the foot of man, that he never need fear being seen there?

"What are we to do?" Wells demanded.

"Let these fellows come back, and then——"

Surprise cut my words short.

The men were barely thirty paces from us when one of them turned round, and the light of the lantern he carried fell full upon his face.

It was the face of one of the men who had dogged me outside my house in Long Street. I could not be mistaken. I recognised him as my old servant would have recognised him. It was he, it was he right enough, one of the spies upon whose track I had never been able to get! Beyond all question the letter I had received came from them, the letter whose writing was identical with that from the Master of the World! Had my

letter, too, been written on board the *Terrible*? True, the threats it contained referred to the Great Eyry, and once again I asked myself what the connection could be between the Great Eyry and the *Terrible*.

I told Wells about it in a few words, and all he said in reply was:

"It's all past understanding!"

The two men had gone on their way towards the copse, and soon they had passed into its verge.

"If only they don't discover our horses!" Wells whispered.

"We need not be afraid they will do that, if they do not go beyond the first row of trees."

"But what if they do discover them?"

"They will come back to go on board again, and it will be time to cut off their retreat."

Meanwhile, there was not a sound to be heard in the direction of the lake, where the boat lay alongside. I left my hollow, went along the pass, and stopped at the spot where the grappling iron bit into the sand.

The machine was there, lying quite quiet at the end of her hawser. There was no light on board, no one on the deck, no one on the

landing stage. Was not the moment a propitious one to leap on board and await the return of the two men?

"Mr. Strock, Mr. Strock!"

It was Wells calling me back.

I returned as fast as I could and crouched down near him.

Perhaps it was too late to take possession of the boat, but perhaps, too, the attempt would have failed if there were other men aboard her.

Anyhow, the man who was carrying the lantern, and his companion, had just reappeared in the edge of the copse and were coming down to the shore again. Plainly, they had seen nothing suspicious. Each carried a bale, and they went along the pass and stopped at the foot of the landing stage.

Immediately one of them called out:

"Hallo, captain!"

"Hallo there!" came the answer.

Wells whispered into my ear:

"There are three of them."

"Four perhaps," I answered; "perhaps five or six!"

The situation was becoming more complicated. What could we do against too large a crew? In any case the least imprudence

would have cost us dear! Now that the two men were back, were they going aboard with their bales? And then, would the boat cast off her hawser and leave the creek, or would she remain where she was until daybreak? But if she were set going, would she not be lost to us? Where should we come upon her again? If she forsook the waters of Lake Erie, had she not all the roads of the neighbouring States, or the course of the Detroit river, which would take her to Lake Huron? And would the present opportunity ever repeat itself, of her being again reported in Black Rock creek?

"Aboard!" said I to Wells. "There are four of us, Hart, Walker, you and I. They are not expecting an attack. They will be taken by surprise . . ."

I was on the point of calling my two men when Wells seized me by the arm.

"Listen!" he said.

At that moment one of the men was hauling in the boat, which was coming nearer to the rocks.

And this is what passed between the captain and his companions:

"Everything all right over there?"

"Everything, captain."

"There are still two bales left?"

"Yes, two."

"One more trip will be enough to bring them to the *Terrible*?"

The *Terrible*! So it was the Master of the World's machine!

"One more trip," one of the men replied.

"Good. We will start to-morrow at sunrise!"

Were there only three aboard, only three, the captain and these two men?

These two, no doubt, were going to fetch the last two bales from the wood. Then when they got back they would probably go on board, would seek their berths and go to sleep. Would not that be the moment to take them by surprise—before they could assume the defensive?

Having heard from the captain's own lips that he would not start before dawn, Wells and I agreed that we would let the men return, and that as soon as they were asleep we would take possession of the *Terrible*.

Why the captain should have left his moorings the day before without having completed the shipping of his stores, as a result of which he had been compelled to return to the creek, I could not explain. Anyhow it was a happy chance for us, of which we would take advantage.

It was now half-past ten. At this moment steps could be heard upon the sand. The man with the lantern came back with his companion and both went up towards the wood. As soon as they had passed into its outskirts, Wells went to warn our men, while I crept to the far end of the pass.

The *Terrible* lay at a cable's length. As far as I could tell she was a machine shaped like a long spindle, with no chimney, masts, or rigging, similar to the one which had manœuvred in the New England seas.

We went back to our posts in the hollows of the rocks, first examining our revolvers, which we might perhaps have occasion to use.

Five minutes had passed since the men had gone out of sight, and we expected to see them come back with the bales any moment. After they had gone on board we would await the moment to spring upon the deck, but we would wait an hour in order to give the captain and his men time to fall into a sound sleep. It was imperative that they should not have time to launch their machine out upon the waters of Lake Erie, nor yet to plunge beneath them, for then we should have been carried off with it.

No, I never in all my experience felt

such frightful impatience! It seemed to me that the two men must be detained in the wood, that something must have occurred to prevent them from leaving it.

Suddenly a noise was heard, the trampling of horses broken loose, a regular stampede all along the outskirts of the wood.

It was our team which had been frightened, had left the clearing and now galloped out on to the shore.

Almost immediately the men appeared, and this time they were running as hard as they could. No doubt our horses had given them the alarm. They assumed that there were police hidden in the wood. They were being spied upon, dogged, and were about to be taken!

So they rushed towards the pass, and after tearing up the grappling iron, they would jump on board. The *Terrible* would vanish like a flash of lightning and the game would be up for good and all!

"Forward!" I shouted.

And down we went on to the shore to cut off the retreat of the men.

Directly they saw us they threw away their bales, and letting off their revolvers, wounded John Hart, who was hit in the leg.

We fired in our turn, but without so much success. The men were neither hit nor checked. Reaching the end of the pass, they did not stop to free the grappling iron, but, with a few strokes, swam out to the *Terrible*, and clambered upon deck.

The captain, standing upright in the bows, revolver in hand, kept up fire, and a ball grazed Wells.

Nab Walker and I seized the hawser and were hauling away.

But it only had to be cut on board for the boat to be set free.

Suddenly the grappling iron was torn out of the sandy shore, and while Walker was bowled over by the shock, one of the flukes caught in my belt, and I was dragged along without being able to free myself.

At this moment the *Terrible* driven forward by her engine, made a leap, as it were, and shot off at full speed across Black Rock creek.

XIII

ON BOARD THE "TERRIBLE"

WHEN I came to myself it was daylight. A subdued light came through the thick port-hole of the narrow cabin in which I had been laid—how many hours ago I could not say. But judging from the obliqueness of its rays I decided that the sun could not be far above the horizon.

I was in a bunk, and a coverlet was spread over me. My clothes had been dried and were hung in a corner. My belt, which had been torn by the fluke of the grappling iron, was lying on the floor.

For the rest, I could not feel any wound: only a little stiffness. If I had lost consciousness I was quite sure that it was not through weakness. As my head was drawn under water several times while the hawser was dragging me along, I should have been drowned if I had not been hauled on to the deck in time.

And now, was I alone with the captain and his two men on board the *Terrible*?

That was probable, not to say certain. The whole scene came back to my mind—

Hart, wounded by a bullet, falling on the beach, Wells grazed by a revolver shot, Walker on his back on the ground, at the moment that the grappling iron caught in my belt. And, for their part, must not my companions be imagining that I had perished in Lake Erie?

What were the conditions under which the *Terrible* was travelling at this present moment? Had her captain changed this boat into an automobile, and was he careering along the roads of the States abutting on the lake? If so, and if I had been unconscious for some length of hours, must not the machine, going full speed, be already far away? Or again, had it been changed once more into a submarine, and was it now pursuing its way beneath the waters of the lake?

But no, the *Terrible* was moving then over the surface of some vast water. The light which came into my cabin proved that the machine was not submerged. And, on the other hand, I felt none of the jolting which the automobile must have suffered on a road. So the *Terrible* had not taken to the land.

It was quite another matter to ascertain if she was still afloat on the basin of Lake Erie. Might not the captain have gone up

the course of the Detroit river and so got into either Lake Huron or Lake Superior through this immense lake region? It would be difficult for me to find out.

However, I decided to go up on deck. Once outside I would consider. Having extricated myself from the bunk I picked up my clothes and dressed, without actually knowing whether I was not locked in the cabin.

Then I tried to lift up the hatch that was closed above my head.

The hatch yielded to my pressure, and I pulled myself up waist high.

My first act was to take a look in front, behind, and to both sides, over the gunwale of the *Terrible*.

On all sides spread a vast sheet of water! There was not a shore in sight! Only a horizon formed by the sky-line! Whether it was lake or sea was a matter which I did not take long to ascertain. As we were moving at high speed, the water, cut by the boat's stem, spurted back to the stern, and my face was whipped by the spray.

It was fresh water, and most likely the water of Lake Erie.

It could only have been seven or eight hours since the *Terrible* left Black Rock creek, for the sun was still half-way from

its zenith. This could only be the morning of July 31st.

Knowing the length of Lake Erie—two hundred and twenty miles—and its breadth—about fifty miles—I had no occasion for surprise in the fact that I could see no shore either on the east on the New York State side, or on the west on the Canadian side.

There were two men on deck at this time, one forward, on the look out, the other aft, keeping the helm set for the north-east, as I gathered from the position of the sun. The first man was the one I had recognised as one of the Long Street spies as he was going up the beach at Black Rock.

The other was the man who had carried the lantern while on the way to the little wood.

I looked in vain for the third, the one whom they had called "captain" when they came back to the boat. I did not see him.

Everyone will understand how anxious I was to find myself in the presence of the creator of this marvellous machine, of the commander of the *Terrible*, the extraordinary individual who absorbed the thoughts and minds of the whole world, the daring inventor who was not afraid to be at war with all humanity, and who proclaimed himself Master of the World!

I went up to the man who was forward, and after a moment of silence, said to him:

"Where is the captain?"

The man looked at me, through half-closed eyes. He seemed not to understand me, yet I knew, from having heard him the day before, that he spoke English.

Another thing I noticed was that he did not seem concerned at seeing me outside the cabin. Then he turned his back on me and resumed his look out over the horizon.

I then went aft, determined to ask the same question about the captain. Directly I was in front of him, the helmsman waved me aside with his hand, and I obtained no answer.

So I had nothing left to do but wait for the appearance of the man whom my companions and I had received with revolver shots when we were pulling away at the *Terrible's* hawser.

I now had leisure to examine the outer arrangements of the machine which was bearing me—who knew whither?

The deck and all the upper work were made of a metal which I did not recognise. 'Midships, a hatch, partly opened, covered the room where the engines were working regularly and almost silently. As I have said before, there were no masts and no

rigging, not even a flagstaff at the stern. Right forward rose the top of a periscope, which enabled the *Terrible* to steer under water.

Upon both sides there were folded down two things like deflectors, such as are seen on some Dutch track-scouts, the use of which I did not understand.

A third hatch, forward, probably covered the berth occupied by the two men when the *Terrible* was not on the move.

An exactly similar hatch, aft, most likely gave access to the cabin of the captain who did not show himself.

When these various hatches were battened down into their place with india-rubber fittings, they fitted so absolutely hermetically that no water could get into the inside of the boat when it was travelling under water.

As for the motor which gave the machine its marvellous speed, I could not get a glimpse of it, nor yet of any propeller, screw or turbine. The only thing I noticed was that the boat left behind it only a long flat track, due to the extreme fineness of its water lines, which gave it every facility to avoid the billows, even in bad weather.

Finally, to make an end of this matter, the agent which worked this machine was not

steam, nor yet petrol, spirit, or any other essence discoverable by its odour, such as are most commonly used for automobiles or submarines. No doubt the agent was electricity stored aboard under extraordinary tension.

The next question which arose was, where did the electricity come from—batteries, accumulators? And how were these accumulators and batteries charged? What was the inexhaustible source that was drawn upon? Where was the manufactory that produced it? Unless, perhaps, it was drawn direct from the air of the water by means hitherto unknown? And I wondered if under my present circumstances I should succeed in discovering these secrets.

Next I thought of my companions, left behind on the Black Rock beach; one wounded and possibly the others, Wells and Nab Walker, wounded too! When they saw me dragged away at the end of the hawser could they have imagined that I would be pulled aboard the *Terrible*? Almost certainly not! Would not the news of my death have been sent to Mr. Ward by telegram from Toledo? and now, who would venture to undertake a fresh campaign against this Master of the World?

All these various thoughts were jumbled together in my brain while I was waiting for the captain to appear on deck.

And still he did not come!

Just now I began to be acutely conscious of hunger, warranted by a fast of nearly twenty-four hours. I had eaten nothing since our last meal, even supposing that it was the day before that I had had that meal. And judging by the pains in my stomach, I was beginning to wonder whether my arrival on board the *Terrible* did not perhaps date back two days, or even more.

Happily the question whether I should be fed, and how I should be fed, was settled there and then.

The man forward had just come back after going down into the berth.

Then, without saying a word, he put some provisions down before me and went back to his place.

Tinned meat, dried fish, sea biscuits, and a pot of such strong ale that I was obliged to mix it with water, made up the meal to which I did full justice. The crew had, no doubt, had their meal before I left my cabin, and they did not keep me company.

There was nothing to be got out of them,

and I fell into thought again, saying over and over:

"What will be the end of this adventure? Shall I see this invisible captain in the end, and will he give me my liberty? Shall I succeed in recovering it for myself and in spite of him? That will depend upon circumstances! But if the *Terrible* keeps off every coast, or if she travels under water, how shall I manage to leave her? Unless the machine is changed into an automobile again, shall I have to abandon all attempts to escape?"

And then—why should I not confess it? —to make my escape without having found out any of the secrets of the *Terrible* was an idea to which I could not reconcile myself! For although I could not congratulate myself so far on what I had done in this new campaign of mine—it had come pretty near costing me my life—and although the future seemed to have more bad chances than good in store for me, still, the affair had advanced a stage. But if I could not get into communication again with my fellow men, and if, like this outlawed Master of the World, I were out of touch with mankind——!

The *Terrible* kept on her north-east course in the same direction as the length of Lake

Erie. She was going at half-speed now, and besides, at her maximum, it would only have taken her a few hours to reach the north-east extremity of the lake.

At that end, the only outlet which Erie has is the Niagara river, which connects it with Lake Ontario. Now that river is barred by the famous falls, fifteen miles or so below Buffalo, an important city of New York State. Since the *Terrible* had not gone up the Detroit river, how could she now get out of these waters, unless she took a land road?

The sun had just passed the meridian. The weather was fine, the heat great, but supportable thanks to a refreshing breeze. The shores of the lake could not yet be seen, either on the Canadian side or the American.

Did the captain really intend not to show himself to me? Had he some reason for not making himself known? Did this caution on his part mean that it was his intention to set me free in the evening, when the *Terrible* should reach the coast? I thought that more unlikely.

But about two o'clock in the afternoon I heard a little noise, the central hatch was lifted up, and the personage who was so eagerly expected appeared on the deck.

I am bound to say that he paid no more attention to me than his men had done, but going towards the helmsman, he took his place aft. After a few words spoken in a low tone the helmsman went down into the engine-room.

After scanning the horizon and consulting the compass, which was fixed before the wheel, the captain slightly altered the direction and the *Terrible's* speed increased.

This man must have turned fifty some years ago; he was of middle height, broad shouldered, very upright still, with a powerful head, short hair, rather grey than white, no moustache or whiskers, but an American goatee beard, muscular arms and legs, a jaw with powerful muscles, broad chest. Undoubtedly, he had an iron constitution, health that was proof, and blood that ran warmly under the deep tan of his skin.

Like his companions, the captain was dressed in sea-clothes, covered by an oil-skin coat, and his head-dress was a woollen cap.

I looked at him. If he did not actually try to avoid my gaze at least he displayed a singular indifference, just as if he had no stranger aboard his ship.

Is it necessary for me to add that the captain of the *Terrible* undoubtedly was

one of the two individuals who watched for me outside my house in Long Street?

And if I recognised him, no doubt he recognised me as Chief-Inspector Strock, to whom had been entrusted the job of getting into the inside of the Great Eyry!

And then, as I looked at him, an idea came into my mind—an idea which had not occurred to me at Washington—that I had seen that characteristic face before—but where? in some file at the criminal investigation department, or—just merely in a photograph in some shop window?

Well, if his companions had not had the courtesy to answer my questions perhaps he would pay them greater respect. We spoke the same language, although I could not have declared that he was, like me, of American origin. Unless, of course, he had made up his mind not to understand me in order not to have to answer me!

Well, what did he want to do with me? Did he intend to relieve himself of my person without any more bother? Was he only waiting until nightfall to throw me into the water? Was the little that I knew about him enough to make me a dangerous witness? It would have been more worth while to leave me at the end of his hawser! That would

have avoided the necessity of sending me to the bottom.

I got up, went aft, and stood upright before him.

His eyes glittering like fire, were fixed full upon me.

"Are you the captain?" I demanded.

Silence on his part.

"This boat—is really the *Terrible*?"

No reply.

Then I went forward meaning to seize him by the arm.

He repulsed me, without violence, but with a movement that suggested strength beyond the common.

Facing him again I asked more sharply: "What do you mean to do with me?"

I thought that a few words would at last escape from his lips, which were contracted in manifest irritation. But he turned his head aside, as if to check himself. Then his hand rested on the regulator.

Immediately the engine worked more rapidly.

Anger gripped me, and losing my control I thought of shouting out to him:

"All right! Hold your tongue! I know who you are, as I know what the machine is that was seen at Madison and Boston, and on Lake Kirdall! Yes: the one that travels

over roads, and on the surface of seas and lakes, and beneath the waters too! And this boat is the *Terrible*, and you who command her—it was you who wrote that letter to the Government, you who fancy yourself strong enough to be at war with the whole world—you!—the Master of the World!"

And how could he have denied it? Why, I had just seen the famous initials engraved upon the wheel.

Fortunately I managed to contain myself, and despairing of obtaining any answer to my questions I went back to my seat near the hatch above my cabin. And for long hours I never ceased to scan the horizon in the hope that land would appear somewhere soon.

Yes, wait! I was reduced to that—to waiting! No doubt the day would not draw to an end before the *Terrible* was in sight of the shore of Erie, since her course was kept steadily north-east.

XIV

NIAGARA

TIME went by and there was no change in the situation. The helmsman had returned to the wheel, and the captain, down below, was superintending the engines. As I have said before, even when the speed was increased the motor worked noiselessly, and with remarkable regularity. There was never any of that throbbing, which is the result of the use of cylinders and pistons. So I concluded that the movement of the *Terrible* in each of its changes was effected by means of rotary machines. But it was impossible for me to verify this.

I observed, moreover, that there was no change in the direction of our course. This was still north-east, and consequently in the direction of Buffalo.

"Why is the captain following this course?" I asked myself. "Surely he can't intend to anchor in that harbour, in the very midst of the fishing fleet and merchantmen! If he wants to leave Erie, Niagara would not give him any passage and the falls are an

impassable barrier even to a machine like his! The only way is by Detroit river, and the *Terrible* is manifestly going away from that!"

Then I thought that perhaps the captain was waiting until nightfall to bring up to one of the shores of Lake Erie. There, the boat, transformed into an automobile, could speedily cross the neighbouring States.

If I did not succeed in making my escape during the journey by land, all hope of recovering my liberty would be lost!

Of course, I should wind up by knowing where this Master of the World hid himself, and hid himself so well that no one had ever succeeded in discovering his retreat, always provided he did not land me in one way or another. And when I say "land" me, the rest will be understood.

However, I knew this north-east point of the lake, having often visited the portion of New York State which lies between Albany, its capital, and Buffalo. A police matter, three years before, had given me an opportunity of exploring the shores of Niagara, above and below the cataracts as far as Suspension Bridge, and to visit the two principal islands between Buffalo and the little town of Niagara Falls, Navy Island and Goat

Island, which divides the American and Canadian Falls.

So if a chance of flight presented itself, I should not be in unknown land. But would such an opportunity present itself, and did I, in my heart of hearts, really desire it, and would I take advantage of it? There were plenty of mysteries still in this affair into which good luck—bad luck, perhaps—had pitched me!

Besides, there was not much reason to suppose that I should have any chance of getting to one of the shores of the Niagara river. The *Terrible* would not venture up that river which gave her no outlet, and very likely she would not go near the shore of Lake Erie at all. If need arose she would plunge beneath water and, after going down Detroit river, would be transformed again into an automobile and taken by her engineer over the roads of the United States.

Such were the thoughts that thronged upon me while my gaze continued to sweep the horizon idly.

And always there persisted the obstinate question which remained unanswerable: Why had the captain written that threatening letter to me, of which I have told? What was his object in coming to keep an eye on

me in Washington? And lastly, what was the link that connected him with the Great Eyry? That he might not have got into Lake Kirdall by means of some subterranean channels was all very well. But cross that insurmountable ring of rocks—no, not that.

About four o'clock in the afternoon, the *Terrible's* speed being granted, on the one hand, and her course being known, on the other, we could not have been more than fourteen or fifteen miles from Buffalo, whose outlines soon began to be defined to the north-east.

In the course of this voyage, although a few ships were sighted, they passed us at a long distance, and the captain kept this distance as it suited him. Besides, the *Terrible* was hardly visible on the surface of the lake, and very difficult to be seen at more than a mile.

However, the heights enclosing the extremity of Lake Erie now began to define themselves, forming, beyond Buffalo, the funnel through which Erie pours its waters in the bed of the Niagara. A few sand-hills swelled up on our right, and here and there trees were growing in clumps. I saw several merchant vessels off the land, and steam or sailing fishing boats.

In places the sky was smudged with trails of smoke which were beaten down by a light westerly breeze.

What was the captain thinking of in making towards this harbour? Did not ordinary prudence forbid him to venture there? Every minute I expected him to give a turn to the wheel in order to go back to the western shore of the lake—unless it were his intention to submerge his boat and spend the night in Erie's depths?

But this persistence in steering for Buffalo was absolutely incomprehensible.

At this moment the helmsman, whose eyes were closely examining the north-east, made a sign to his companion. The latter rose, went to the hatch midships, and went down into the engine-room.

Almost immediately the captain came up on deck, and joining the helmsman, conversed with him in a low tone.

The helmsman, stretching his hand out in the direction of Buffalo, pointed out two blackish specks which were moving five or six miles ahead of us on our starboard.

The captain looked attentively in their direction; then he shrugged his shoulders and went and sat down aft, without altering the *Terrible's* course.

A quarter of an hour later I made out two smoke trails in the north-east. Gradually the shape of the specks defined themselves more clearly.

They were two steamers which had come out from Buffalo harbour and were rapidly coming nearer.

Suddenly it occurred to me that these steamers were the destroyers of which Mr. Ward had told me, that had been commissioned for some time to patrol this portion of the lake, the destroyers whose help I had been given authority to enlist.

These destroyers were of a modern type and ranked among the fastest steamers built in the United States. Equipped with powerful engines of the last degree of perfection, they had attained a speed of twenty-seven knots in their trials.

Of course, the *Terrible* possessed a very much greater speed, and in any case, if she found herself too hard pressed and in danger of having her retreat cut off, she only had to submerge and she would be safe from all pursuit.

As a matter of fact the steamers would have had to be submarines rather than destroyers to have had any chance of engaging with success, and even then I do not know if the match would have been an equal one.

What seemed certain to me now was that the commanders of these vessels had had warning, perhaps from Wells, who might have telegraphed them directly he got back to Toledo.

It seemed evident, too, that they had sighted the *Terrible* and were chasing her at top speed. And yet the captain continued to steer towards the Niagara without appearing to take any notice of them.

What would the destroyers do? Certainly they would manœuvre in such a way as to force the *Terrible* to bottle herself up in the corner of Erie, with Buffalo on her starboard, since the Niagara had no passage to offer.

The captain had taken the wheel, one of the men was forward, the other was in the engine-room.

Was I not going to be ordered down into my cabin?

Nothing of the sort happened, much to my satisfaction, and to tell the truth no one seemed to bother himself about me, any more than if I had not been on board.

I watched with keen excitement the approach of the destroyers. Less than a couple of miles away now, they were manœuvring so as to get the *Terrible* between two fires.

As for the Master of the World, the expression on his face was only one of the most profound contempt. He knew that the destroyers could do absolutely nothing against him. An order to the engine, and he would leave them far behind, fast as they were. A few turns of the motor and the *Terrible* would be out of range of their guns; and shells would not touch the submarine in the depths of Erie.

Ten minutes later a bare mile separated us from the two vessels which were chasing us.

The captain let them come nearer still. Then he leaned upon the hand-rail, and the *Terrible*, responding to the increased power of her engines, leaped over the surface of the lake. She was playing with the destroyers, and instead of retiring, continued on her way forward. Who knows if she might not have had the impudence to pass between them, and to draw them on after her until such time as nightfall compelled them to abandon this futile pursuit?

The town of Buffalo stood out prominently now upon the shore of Erie. I saw its buildings distinctly, its clocks and elevators. A little more to the north-west the Niagara opened out, four or five miles away.

What line ought I to take in these circumstances? When we got athwart, or rather, between the destroyers, would not that be the chance for me, as I was a good swimmer, to jump into the water, a chance which, perhaps, would not occur again? The captain would not be able to slow down to pick me up. If I plunged in, should I not have a chance of escaping from him? I should be seen from one or other of the ships. It was quite on the cards that the commanders had been warned of my possible presence on board the *Terrible*. A boat might put off to pick me up.

Manifestly the chances of success would be greater if the *Terrible* got between the two banks of the Niagara. Off Navy Island I could step ashore on territory that I knew well. But it seemed impossible that the captain would venture on to a river which was barred by cataracts. So I determined to let the destroyers get nearer still, and when the moment came I would decide.

For I am bound to confess my mind was not made up. I could not reconcile myself to the idea of losing all hope of solving this mystery by making my escape. My professional instincts rebelled when I reflected that I only had to put out my hand to seize

this outlaw. No, I would not save myself. That would have meant throwing up the game for good and all. And yet, what fate was in store for me, and where would the *Terrible* carry me off to if I remained on board?

It was a quarter past six. The destroyers were coming nearer to one another, leaving a distance of twelve to fifteen cables between them. The *Terrible* would soon have one of them on her port and one on her starboard.

I had not left my place. The man who was forward was near me.

Motionless at the wheel, with eyes blazing under frowning brows, the captain seemed to be waiting for the moment to make an end of the business by a final manœuvre.

Suddenly there was a resounding detonation from the destroyer on our left. A shell, skimming over the surface of the water, passed over the bows of the *Terrible* and disappeared behind the destroyer on our right.

I got up. Standing erect by my side, the man seemed to be waiting for a sign from the captain.

The latter did not even turn his head, and I shall never forget the look of scorn that was written on his face.

And instantly I was pushed towards the hatch above my cabin, which was closed down on me, while the other hatches were battened down as well. A bare minute passed before the plunge had been made. The submarine had disappeared beneath the waters of the lake.

Other gunshots rang out whose heavy roar reached my ears. Then all was silent. A dim light came through the port-hole of my cabin. The machine, without the faintest rolling or pitching, was speeding silently through Lake Erie.

This will show how quickly and easily the transformation of the *Terrible* was effected, no doubt as easily and as quickly when it became a question of travelling over roads.

And what was the Master of the World going to do now? Very likely he would change his course, unless when it touched land the *Terrible* was to become an automobile again. But upon reflection I came to the conclusion that it would probably go westward instead, now that it had put the destroyers off its track, and would then regain the mouth of the Detroit river. Probably it would only remain under water long enough to get out of range of the shells, and night would put an end to the chase.

This did not prove to be the case. Ten minutes had barely elapsed when there was a certain commotion on board. Words exchanged in the engine-room became audible. A noise of machinery accompanied them. I supposed that some mishap was compelling the boat to return to the surface.

I was not mistaken. In a moment the half-light of my cabin was flooded with daylight. The *Terrible* had just emerged. I heard steps on deck where the hatches were opened, even mine.

The captain had resumed his post at the wheel, while his two men were busy down below.

I looked to see if the destroyers were in sight. Yes, only a quarter of a mile away. They had seen the *Terrible* again and were after her already. But this time it was in the direction of the Niagara.

I confess I could make nothing of this manœuvre. Hemmed in in that *cul-de-sac*, and prevented from diving again by reason of its injury, the machine would find its way barred by the destroyers when it wanted to retire towards its rear. Would it attempt then to gain the land and to take to flight, in its capacity of automobile, either across New York State or across Canadian territory?

The *Terrible* was then half a mile in front. The destroyers were chasing her at top speed, but under conditions which were not favourable of their hitting her with their forward guns.

She contented herself with maintaining this distance. But it would have been quite easy for her to increase it, and when night fell to return to the western waters.

Buffalo was already fading from view upon our right, and a little after seven o'clock the entrance into the Niagara appeared. If he went in there, knowing that he could not get out again, the captain would have lost his wits. But, in point of fact, was he not mad already, this man who proclaimed himself and believed himself to be the Master of the World?

I watched him there calm and impassive, not so much as turning his head to watch the destroyers.

This portion of the lake was absolutely deserted. The vessels bound for the little towns along the banks of the Niagara are never many, and not one was to be seen now; not even a fishing smack crossed the *Terrible's* course. In any event, if the two destroyers followed her into the Niagara, they would very soon be obliged to stop.

As I have said, the Niagara opens out between the American and the Canadian banks. On one side is Buffalo, on the other Fort Erie. Its breadth, which is about three-quarters of a mile, diminishes as the falls are approached. Its length from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario is about forty-five miles, and it is as it flows northwards that it carries into this latter lake the waters of Lakes Superior, Michigan, and Huron. There is a difference of three hundred and forty feet in the elevation of Lakes Erie and Ontario The fall accounts for quite a hundred and fifty feet of this. Called "Horse-shoe Fall," because it assumes the shape of a horse's shoe, the Indians gave it the name of "Thunder of Waters," and it really is a thunder which rolls unceasingly, the noise of which can be heard miles away from the cataract.

Between Buffalo and the little town of Niagara Falls the course of the river is divided by two islands, Navy Island, about two and a half miles above Horse-shoe Fall, and Goat Island, which separates the American from the Canadian fall. It was on its extremity that there formerly stood that terrapin tower, so daringly set in the very middle of the torrent, on the very edge of the abyss; it has been necessary to pull it down, for otherwise

the incessant recoil of the cataract would have swept it away into the gulf.

Two small towns in the upper reaches of the Niagara must be mentioned, Schlosser on the right bank, and Chipewa on the left bank, on each side of Navy Island. It is off this island that the current, urged on by an ever and ever steeper slope, begins to gain force, to become, two miles lower down, the famous cataract.

The *Terrible* had passed Fort Erie. The sun was poised in the west above the Canadian horizon, and the moon, a full one, was emerging from the mists in the south-west. It would not be dark for another hour.

The destroyers, banking up their fires, were following at the distance of a mile, without being able to gain an inch. They sped along between the banks, shaded by trees and strewn with cottages, which opened out into long and verdant plains.

Manifestly, the *Terrible* could no longer effect a retreat by the rear. The destroyers would inevitably have run her down. It is true their commanders did not know what I knew, that an accident which had befallen the machine had compelled her to return to the surface of the lake and that it was impossible for her to escape by diving again.

Nevertheless, they continued to go forward, and no doubt they would do so up to the farthest possible point.

But if I could not understand this persistent chase on their part, I quite failed to understand the behaviour of the *Terrible*. The course would be barred to her in half an hour by the cataract. However highly developed the machine might be, it had not the power to pass the Horse-shoe Fall, and if the torrent swept it away, it would appear in the gulf a hundred and eighty feet deep that the waters have hollowed out at the foot of the falls. Perhaps by running ashore on one of the banks, it would have the resource of taking to flight on its automobile wheels and doing its two hundred and forty miles in the hour.

What was I to do now? Should I attempt to save myself athwart Navy Island, whose bluffs I could easily reach by swimming? If I did not take advantage of this opportunity, never, never, with what I knew of his secrets, would the Master of the World give me my liberty.

Well, it seemed clear to me, then, that this time escape was to be cut off from me. If I was not confined to my cabin, I was at least kept under supervision. While the

captain remained at the wheel his companion near me never took his eyes off me. At the first movement on my part I should have been seized and locked in. At present my fate was certainly bound up with that of the *Terrible*.

The distance which separated her from the destroyers was reduced now to a few cables' length. Did this mean that the *Terrible's* motor, as a result of the accident, could not do any more? However, the captain did not display the least anxiety, and did not make any attempt to make the land.

We heard the whistling of the steam escaping through the valves of the destroyers in the midst of trails of black smoke.

But we also heard the roaring of the cataract less than three miles below.

The *Terrible* took the left arm of the river along Navy Island, whose extreme point it had soon passed. A quarter of an hour later the first trees on Goat Island appeared. The current became more and more rapid, and if the *Terrible* refused to stop, the destroyers would not be able to give chase to her much longer. And if it pleased this accursed captain to allow himself to be engulfed in the vortex of the Horse-shoe Fall, they would not follow him into the abyss.

Indeed, there was a loud whistling now and the destroyers stopped when they were only five or six hundred feet away from the cataract. Then reports rang out above and several shells passed about the *Terrible*, without hitting her.

The sun had just gone down, and in the midst of twilight the moon was shedding her rays towards the north. The speed of the machine, increased by the speed of the current, was amazing. In another minute it would plunge into the dark pit formed in the centre of the Canadian fall.

With terrified eye I gazed at the last bluffs of Goat Island; then at its head, the islets of the Three Sisters, drenched in the spray of the tumultuous waters.

I rose. I intended to plunge into the river in order to gain the island.

The man's hand fell heavy on me.

Suddenly there was a loud noise of machinery from the bowels of the boat. The great deflectors, laid on to the sides of the machine, extended themselves like wings, and at the very moment when the *Terrible* was being drawn into the fall she rose through space, clearing the roaring cataracts in the midst of a spectral lunar rainbow.

XV

THE EAGLE'S NEST

WHEN I woke up next morning after rather a heavy sleep, the machine was not moving. I knew that at once. It was not rolling over ground, nor sailing on or under water, nor yet flying through the air. Was I therefore to conclude that its inventor had regained the mysterious retreat where no human foot before his own had ever been set?

And since he had not relieved himself of my person, was his secret about to be revealed to me at last?

It may cause some surprise that I should have slept soundly during this voyage through the air. I am surprised at it myself, and I wondered if my sleep was not induced perhaps by the admixture of some drug in my last meal, the captain desiring thus to make it impossible for me to recognise the spot where he came to earth. The only positive statement I can make is that the sensation was appalling which I felt at the moment when the machine, instead of being swept into the whirlpool of the cataract, rose under the influence of its engine, like a bird whose

broad wings flapped with a power that was amazing.

So then, this machine of the Master of the World fulfilled this fourfold function; it was at once an automobile, a boat, a submarine, and a flying machine. Land, sea, and air—it could move through all three elements, and with what power, what speed! It only required a few moments to effect these marvellous changes! The same engine controlled all these different modes of locomotion! I myself had been a witness of these transformations! But what I still did not know, what I might yet discover perhaps, was the source of energy upon which this machine drew, and what manner of man the inventive genius was who, after having created it from beginning to end, now drove it with a skill that equalled his daring!

At the moment when the *Terrible* rose above the Canadian fall I was leaning against the hatchway to my cabin. In the clear evening I was able to observe the direction the flying machine took. It flew above the river and passed Suspension Bridge three miles below Horse-shoe Fall. It is here that the impassable rapids of the Niagara begin, the river then making a bend on its way down towards Lake Ontario.

Leaving this point, the machine seemed to me to swerve decidedly to the east.

The captain still remained aft. I had not spoken a word to him. What would have been the good? He would not have answered me.

I noticed that the *Terrible* answered to the helm with surprising ease. Beyond all question the courses of the air were as familiar to it as the courses of the sea and of the land.

And when confronted with such results, would not anyone understand the tremendous pride of the man who declared himself the Master of the World? Had he not got at his command an engine superior to any that had ever come from the hand of man, and against which all mankind was powerless? Why should he have sold it, indeed, why should he have accepted the millions that were offered him? Yes, I fully understood the complete confidence in himself which radiated from the man's whole person! And where would his ambition take him, if by reason of its own over-vaulting excess it some day degenerated into insanity.?

Half an hour after the *Terrible* took to flight I fell, not knowing when or how, into a state of absolute unconsciousness. As I have said, this condition must have been

induced by some drug. No doubt the captain did not wish to allow me to know the course he took.

So I am unable to say whether the aviator continued his flight through space, or whether he sailed upon the surface of a sea or lake, or whether he took to any American roads. I have no recollection at all of what occurred during that night of July 31st.

Well, what was going to happen next, and, most of all, so far as I was concerned, how would this adventure end?

I have said already that when my unaccountable sleep came to an end, the *Terrible* seemed to be motionless. There was no mistake about that; I should have felt any movement, however it was made, even through the air.

When I woke I was in my cabin, where I had been shut in without my being aware of it, as had happened the first night I spent aboard the *Terrible* on Lake Erie.

The whole question was whether I should be allowed to go on deck now the machine had come to ground.

I tried to raise the hatch, which did not yield to my pressure.

"Aha!" said I to myself; "does that mean that I shall not be released until the

Terrible has taken to the water or the air again?"

Those, of course, were the only two conditions under which escape was quite impossible.

Everyone will understand my impatience and anxiety while I did not know how long this halt on earth would last.

I did not have as much as ten minutes to wait. The sound of bolts withdrawn reached me. The hatch was lifted from outside. Light and air came surging into my cabin.

With one spring I found myself on deck and at my accustomed place.

At once my eyes had swept the whole horizon.

The *Terrible*, as I had supposed, was resting on the ground, in the middle of an amphitheatre measuring five or six hundred yards in circumference. Its whole area was covered with a carpet of yellowish gravel without a single blade of grass.

This amphitheatre was an almost regular oval in shape, with its greatest diameter extending from north to south. I was unable to form any definite opinion about the rocks that enclosed it, their height, or the disposition of their upper ridge. Above our heads were gathered very dense mists which

the rays of the sun had not yet dissolved. A few broad trails of vapour hung as low as the sandy bottom of the amphitheatre. No doubt the day was still very young and the mist would be dissipated before long.

I had the impression that the temperature within this amphitheatre was pretty low, although this was August 1st. I inferred from that that it must be situated in some high region of the New Continent. What region? It was impossible to form any opinion on that point. In any case, however rapid its flight might be, the flying machine had not had time to cross the Atlantic or the Pacific, for not more than twelve hours had passed since we left Niagara.

Just at this moment the captain came out of a cavity, probably some grotto hollowed out in the base of the enclosure that was bathed in mist.

Sometimes the outlines of great birds appeared through the mist, and their hoarse cries disturbed the profound silence. Perhaps they were scared by the advent of this monster with the terrible wings, for which they were no match either in strength or speed!

Thus everything led me to conclude that it was here that the Master of the World retired when his amazing voyages came to

an end. This was the coach-house for his motor car, the harbour for his boat, the nest for his flying machine! And now the *Terrible* was resting motionless in the centre of this amphitheatre!

At last I was to be able to examine her, and it did not look to me as if anyone had any idea of preventing me. The fact is, the captain appeared to trouble as little about my presence now as he had done hitherto. His two companions had just joined him. Soon all three went into the grotto, of which I have spoken. So I was able to examine the machine, externally at least.

With the exception of the one leading to my cabin all the hatchways were closed and I tried in vain to open them. After all, perhaps, it was more interesting to learn what motor power the *Terrible* employed in its manifold transformations.

I sprang to the ground and had plenty of time to go on with my preliminary examination.

The machine was spindle-shaped, the bow more pointed than the stern, the hull of aluminium, the wings of a material of which I could not determine the nature. It rested on four wheels two feet in diameter, and fitted with very thick pneumatic tyres, which ensured smoothness of movement at any speed.

The spokes were made very wide, like blades, so that when the *Terrible* moved under or on the water, they increased her pace.

But these wheels did not provide the main motor power. This consisted of two Parson's turbines placed longitudinally on each side of the keel. Worked at tremendous speed by the engine, they produced the motion by screw action in water, and I wondered if they were not employed in the propulsion through air.

In any case, if the machine could keep up and could move in the air, it was due to these large wings, which were folded down on its sides, when it was at rest, like deflectors. So it was the "heavier than air" system that the inventor employed, a system which enabled him to travel through space at a speed greater perhaps than that of the most powerful birds.

As for the physical agent which set all these various mechanical appliances in action, it could, as I have said before, only be electricity. But whence did the accumulators derive it? Was there a manufactory of electric energy somewhere, from which they were supplied? Could it be that there were dynamos at work in one of the caves in this amphitheatre?

The net result, then, of my investigation was, that though this machine made use of wheels, of turbines, and of wings, I still knew nothing of the mechanism, nor yet of the agent which set it in motion. Yet how would the discovery of the secret have benefited me? I should have had to be free, and after what I had found out—little as that was—the Master of the World would never give me my liberty!

There remained, no doubt, the possibility of escaping. But would an opportunity ever present itself? And if it did not during the course of the *Terrible's* voyages, would it do so when she was lying up in this enclosure?

But the first question to solve was, where was this amphitheatre? Where was it that the flying machine had just come to earth? What communication was there with the immediate neighbourhood? Was there no way out? Could it only be gained by clearing its walls with a flying machine? And in what part of the United States had we come to ground? For assuredly, rapid as her flight had been, if the assumption were well founded that she had only started the day before, the *Terrible* could not have left America, nor even the New World, for the Old World!

Was it not reasonable to estimate the distance covered during the night by a few hundred miles only?

There was one suggestion which occurred constantly to my mind and which deserved to be examined and perhaps accepted. Why should not the *Terrible* have for her home port the Great Eyry itself? Did not this flying machine possess every facility for entering it? Was not a flying machine capable of doing what the vultures and eagles did? Did not this inaccessible aerie offer to the Master of the World so secret a retreat that our police had not been able to discover it, and one in which he could believe himself to be beyond attack? Besides, the distance between the Niagara Falls and this part of the Blue Ridge is not more than four hundred and fifty miles, and the *Terrible* could have covered that in twelve hours.

Yes! Little by little this idea took form and substance in my brain, in the midst of many others! And was not the connection between the Great Eyry and the author of the letter with the initials, which I had not understood before, intelligible for this reason? And the threats which were held out against me if I renewed my attempt? And the spying to which I had been

subjected? And the phenomena of which the Great Eyry had been the theatre, must not they, too, be attributed to him, for some reason which still eluded me? Yes! The Great Eyry! The Great Eyry! And since it had been impossible for me to get into it until now, would it be impossible for me to get out of it except on board the *Terrible*?

Oh! if the mist dispersed, perhaps I should recognise it! Perhaps this supposition would prove a fact!

But since I had perfect freedom to come and go as I liked, since neither the captain nor his companions took any notice of me, I would make the round of the enclosure.

Just now all three were in the grotto at the north end of the oval, so I began my inspection at the south end.

Going up to the wall, I walked along its base, which was hollowed out by many little caverns. Above me rose the smooth cliff of the feldspar rock, of which the Allegheny chain is formed. How this high cliff rose and what was the arrangement of its upper rim, it was still impossible to see, and I should have to wait until the mist was dispersed either by the breeze or by the action of the sun's rays.

Meanwhile, I continued to follow the outline of the great mass, the hollows in which were lighted only by their own opening. All sorts of debris lay inside, bits of wood, and heaps of dry grass. Within them could still be seen the footprints left upon the sand by the captain and his men.

They did not show themselves, being no doubt busy in the grotto, in front of which several bales were laid down. Did they intend to carry these bales on board the *Terrible*, and were they preparing for a general household removal with a view to leaving this retreat finally?

Having finished my tour, in about half an hour I went back to the centre. Here and there were piled up broad layers of cold ashes, blanched by time, remains of charred beams and planks, doorposts, to which the ironwork still clung, iron braces twisted by fire, all the wreckage of machinery destroyed by burning.

At some date more or less recent, this amphitheatre had certainly been the scene of a fire, intentional or accidental. And how could one avoid connecting that fire with the phenomena observed at the Great Eyry, the flames that appeared above the enclosure, the noises that rang across the air and so

terrified the inhabitants of the district, the people of Pleasant Garden and of Morganton? But what was the material then, and what was the captain's object in destroying it?

Just at this moment came a gust of the breeze which was rising in the east. The sky was suddenly cleared of all the mist. The enclosure was flooded with light under the rays of the sun, which stood half-way between the horizon and the zenith.

A cry escaped my lips!

The rim of the rocky wall had just become visible a hundred feet above me. And on the east side there stood out before my eyes an unmistakable outline, the rock that was carved in the likeness of an eagle.

It was, indeed, the one that Elias Smith and I had noticed when we made our ascent of the Great Eyry!

So there was no doubt about it now! During the past night the machine had covered in its flight the distance between Lake Erie and North Carolina! It was at the bottom of this aerie that the machine was laid by! This was the fitting nest for the powerful and gigantic bird created by the genius of its inventor, the insuperable rocks containing it which it was impossible for any but him to pass! And who could

say even if he had not discovered in some profound cavern a subterannean communication with the outside, through which it was possible for him to leave the Great Eyry while leaving the *Terrible* there?

And so all was revealed completely to my mind! And so the first letter from the Great Eyry, which threatened me with death, was explained! And if we had been able to effect entrance into this amphitheatre, who can say whether the secrets of the Master of the World would not have been discovered before he had a chance to put himself beyond reach of attack?

I stood there motionless, my eyes fixed upon the stone eagle, a prey to violent emotion! And I wondered if, come what might of it, I ought not to try to destroy this machine before it could resume its flight across the world!

I heard the sound of footsteps.

I turned round.

The captain was coming towards me, and he stopped and looked me full in the face.

I could contain myself no longer and the words poured forth:

"The Great Eyry! The Great Eyry!"

"Yes! Inspector Strock!"

"And you—the Master of the World?"

"Of the world, to which he has already revealed himself as the most powerful of mankind."

"You?" I cried, at the very height of amazement.

"I," he answered, drawing himself up in all his pride; "I; Robur; Robur the Conqueror!"

XVI

ROBUR THE CONQUEROR

It is necessary to recall shortly the events which drew the attention of the entire country to the said Robur.* For from them ensued this amazing adventure, the end of which it was beyond the power of human foresight to anticipate.

In the evening of June 12th, a meeting of the Weldon Institute was held at Philadelphia under the presidency of Uncle Prudent, one of the most prominent men in the Pennsylvanian capital; the secretary was Phil Evans, a no less prominent personage in the same city. The question under discussion was the important one of dirigible balloons. The administrative council had just been at the pains to construct a balloon, the *Go-ahead*, with a capacity of forty thousand cubic metres. Its horizontal movement was effected by a dynamo at once light and powerful, from which the best results were expected and which worked a screw. But where was

* See the volume entitled *Robur the Conqueror* in the series "Amazing Adventures," from which the three illustrations to this chapter are taken.

this screw to be fixed? Behind the car, according to some, in front of the car, according to others!

This question was not yet decided, and on this occasion it set the "Forwards" and the "Afters" by the ears. The discussion became so heated that some members of the Weldon Institute were actually on the point of coming to blows when, in the midst of the hubbub, a stranger asked to be admitted into the session hall.

He was admitted, being announced under the name of Robur. He requested permission to address the meeting, and did so in the midst of general silence. Then, boldly intervening in the debate on the question of dirigible balloons, he declared that since man had become master of the sea with ships propelled by sails, paddle wheels or screws, he could only become master of the air by employing machines that were heavier than air, seeing that they must be heavier in order to be able to move there with entire freedom.

It was the eternal conflict between lighter than air and heavier than air machines. In this session, where the advocates of the lighter than air system were in a majority, it broke out again with so much violence that Robur, to whom sarcastic rivals gave the nickname

of "The Conqueror," was obliged to leave the hall.

But after this singular individual had left, a few hours later, the president and the secretary of the Weldon Institute were the victims of a most audacious abduction. They were crossing Fairmount Park, attended by a manservant, Frycolin, when several men threw themselves upon them, gagged them, and bound them; then, despite their resistance, they carried them off through the deserted paths and put them into a machine which stood in the middle of a glade. When day came they were captives in Robur's flying machine, and hovering in the air above a country which they tried in vain to identify.

Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans were about to prove for themselves that the speaker of the day before had not deceived them, and that he possessed an aerial machine based on the heavier than air principle which by good or bad luck—they would soon know—had a most extraordinary voyage in store for them.

This machine, designed and built by the engineer Robur, relied upon the two-fold operation of the screw which, in turning, moves in the direction of its axis. If the axis is vertical, it moves vertically; if it is

horizontal, it moves horizontally: like the helicopter, which rises because it strikes the air obliquely as if it were moving along an inclined plane.

This flying machine, the *Albatross*, consisted of a vessel thirty metres in length, fitted with two propellers, one in front, the other behind, and a set of thirty-seven suspensory screws with vertical axes, fifteen on each side of the vessel, and seven loftier ones in the middle of the machine. This gave a total of thirty-seven masts, rigged with branches instead of sails, to which the engines installed in the deck houses gave a prodigious rotary movement.

With regard to the power employed to support and move this flying machine, it was not furnished by steam or vapour or any other liquid, nor yet by compressed air or other elastic gas. Nor was it in any explosive composition that Robur had sought it, but rather in that agent which lends itself to so many uses, in electricity. But how and whence did the inventor derive the electricity with which he charged his batteries and his accumulators? Most probably—his secret has never been known—he drew it from the surrounding air, which is always more or less charged with fluid, just as the

famous Captain Nemo drew it from the surrounding water when he drove his *Nautilus* through the depths of the ocean.

Neither Uncle Prudent nor Phil Evans, it must be told, discovered this secret during the course of the long aerial voyage which the *Albatross* took above the terrestrial globe.

The crew that was under the orders of the engineer Robur, consisted of a first mate, named John Turner, three engineers, two assistants, and a cook, eight men in all for the adequate service of his ship.

And as Robur said to his two passengers, his unwilling companions: "With my flying machine I am master of the seventh portion of the world, vaster than Australia, Oceania, Asia, America, and Europe."

Then there began that daring expedition on board the *Albatross*, beginning above the vast territories of North America. In vain did Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans make loud and justifiable protest; it was spurned by Robur in virtue of his right of the strongest. They had to resign themselves, or rather to bow before the right.

The *Albatross*, travelling westward, passed the enormous chain of the Rocky Mountains and the plains of California; then,

leaving San Francisco behind, it crossed the northern zone of the Pacific to the peninsula of Kamtschatka. Before the eyes of the passengers in the flying machine there next were spread the regions of the Celestial Empire, and Pekin, the Chinese capital, was seen within its four-fold enclosure. Raised by its lifting screws the flying machine rose to higher altitudes, passing the Himalayan peaks, with their summits white with snow, and their sparkling glaciers. It never deflected from its westward course. It churned the air above Persia and the Caspian Sea, and then it crossed the European frontier and the steppes of Muscovy, following the valley of the Volga, and being seen by Moscow and by St. Petersburg, and reported by the inhabitants of Finland, and the fishers of the Baltic. Approaching Sweden in the parallel of Stockholm, and Norway in the latitude of Christiania, it came down southwards again, hovered a thousand metres above France, and swooping down over Paris, hung a hundred feet above the mighty capital, over which its lamps flung dazzling streams of light. Then Italy passed below it, with Florence, Rome, and Naples, and the Mediterranean, which it crossed obliquely. The airship reached

the coast of Africa the mighty, over which it travelled from Cape Spartel in Morocco to Egypt, above Algeria, Tunis, and Tripoli. Turning towards Timbuctoo, the Queen of the Soudan, it ventured over the surface of the Atlantic.

And still it kept its south-westerly course, and there was nothing which could stay it above this vast liquid plain, no, not even the storms which burst there with appalling violence, not even one of those formidable whirlwinds which surrounded it with tornados, and from which its cool and skilful pilot extricated it by shattering the whirlwind with cannon shots.

When land appeared again it was at the entrance to the Straits of Magellan. The *Albatross* traversed these from north to south, and left land at the extremity of Cape Horn to soar above the southern waters of the Pacific Ocean.

Then, braving the lonely regions of the Antarctic seas, and struggling with a cyclone, into the relatively quiet heart of which he succeeded in making his way, Robur travelled over the almost unknown area of Graham Land; for several hours he hung above the Pole, in the midst of all the splendours of a southern dawn. Swept on once more by a

hurricane and hurried towards Erebus, which belched its volcanic flames, it was only by a miracle that he escaped.

Finally, at the end of July, after going up towards the Pacific once more, he arrived off an island in the Pacific Ocean. The anchor, dropping over the side, bit into the rocks upon the shore, and for the first time since its start the *Albatross* stayed motionless, a hundred and fifty feet above the ground, held up by its suspensory screws.

This Island, as Uncle Prudent and his companion were to learn, was Chatham Island, fifteen degrees east of New Zealand. The airship touched ground there because the propellors had been damaged in the last hurricane and required repairs, without which it could not have got back to X Island, still two thousand eight hundred miles away —the unknown island in the Pacific where the *Albatross* had been built.

Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans knew perfectly well that as soon as the repairs were effected the airship would resume its interminable voyage. And so, when it was moored to the ground, the opportunity seemed a favourable one for them to attempt an escape.

The anchor cable which held the *Albatross* measured a hundred and fifty feet at

most. By sliding down this the two passengers and their manservant Frycolin would reach ground without much difficulty, and if they made their escape at night, they would run no risk of being seen. Of course, their flight would be discovered at break of day, and as the fugitives could not escape from Chatham Island they would be retaken.

So this was the daring plan on which they agreed: to blow up the machine with a dynamite cartridge taken from the stores on board, smash the wings of the powerful airship, and destroy it, together with its inventor and his crew. Before the cartridge exploded they would have time to escape by the cable and would witness the destruction of the *Albatross*, of which not a vestige would remain.

And what they had decided to do, they did. When evening came the cartridge was lighted and all three slid down to earth without having been seen. But at that very moment their escape was discovered. Shots were fired at them from the platform, but without hitting them. Then Uncle Prudent flung himself upon the anchor cable and cut it, and the *Albatross*, unable to use its screw propellers, was carried away by the wind and, shattered

by the explosion shortly afterwards, sank in the waves of the Pacific Ocean.

It will be remembered that it was on the night of June 12th, that Uncle Prudent, Phil Evans, and Frycolin, had disappeared after leaving the Weldon Institute. No news had been received of them since then. It was impossible to form any conjecture as to what had happened. Was there any connection between their extraordinary disappearance and the Robur incident during the memorable session? That idea did not occur, could not have occurred to anybody.

But the colleagues of the two honourable gentlemen were anxious at seeing no more of them. Inquiries were made, the police were called in, telegrams were sent in all directions, over the New and Old World too. The results were absolutely none at all. Even a reward of five thousand dollars offered to anyone who should bring in any information relating to the parties who had disappeared, remained unclaimed in the coffers of the Weldon Institute.

Such was the situation. The excitement, especially in the United States, was great, and I have a vivid recollection of it, On September 20th, news which was first current in Philadelphia at once spread far and wide.

Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans had walked into the house of the President of the Weldon Institute that afternoon.

The same evening all the members convened in session received their two colleagues with enthusiasm. To the questions which were put to them, those gentlemen replied with the utmost reserve, or to put it more accurately, did not reply at all. But this is what became known later.

After the *Albatross* had drifted away and disappeared, Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans applied their attention to securing the means of existence while waiting for the first opportunity to leave Chatham Island. On the western coast they fell in with a tribe of natives who gave them a friendly reception. But this island is little frequented, and vessels seldom touch it. So they had to possess themselves in patience, and it was not until five weeks later that these shipwrecked aeronauts were able to embark for America.

When they got home, what do you suppose was the one and only thought of Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans? Why, simply to pick up their work that had been interrupted, finish constructing the *Go-ahead*, and take their flight again through the upper regions of the air, which they had only just travelled

through under such amazing conditions on board the airship! They would not have been true Americans if they had done anything else.

On April 20th of the following year, the balloon was ready to start under the command of Harry W. Tynder, the celebrated aeronaut, who was to be accompanied by the president and the secretary of the Weldon Institute.

I ought to add that, since their return nobody had heard anything of Robur, any more than if he had never existed. And besides, was there not every reason to suppose that his adventurous career had been terminated after the blowing up of the *Albatross*, which was sunk in the depths of the Pacific?

The day fixed for the ascent arrived. I was present, with thousands of other spectators, in Fairmount Park. The *Go-ahead* was to ascend to the very limit of height, thanks to its enormous volume. Needless to say, the question of the "Forwards" and the "Afters" had been settled in a way that was as simple as it was logical; there was a screw in front of the car and a screw behind it, to be worked by electricity of a greater power than had ever yet been known.

For the rest, the weather was favourable, a cloudless sky, and not a breath of wind.

At twenty minutes past eleven a gun announced to the vast crowd that the *Go-ahead* was ready to start.

"Let go!"

The impressive order was called out in a loud voice by Uncle Prudent himself. The balloon rose into the air slowly and majestically. Then the trials of horizontal movement began, an operation which was crowned with the most signal success.

Suddenly a cry rang out—a cry re-echoed by a hundred thousand throats!

In the north-west a moving object appeared, which drew near with excessive speed.

It was the same machine which, the year before, had carried off the two members of the Weldon Institute and had borne them over Europe, Asia, Africa, and the two Americas.

"The *Albatross!* The *Albatross!*"

Yes, indeed, it was the *Albatross*, and there could be no doubt that its inventor Robur was on board, Robur the Conqueror.

Imagine the stupefaction of Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans when they saw once more the *Albatross*, which they believed to be destroyed! It actually had been destroyed by the explosion, and its shattered pieces had fallen into the Pacific, with the engineer and all his crew! But they had been picked up

almost at once by a ship and taken to Australia, when they had lost no time in getting back to X Island.

Robur had but one idea: to get his revenge. And so, to make sure of that, he built another airship, even more highly perfected perhaps. Then, having learnt that the president and secretary of the Weldon Institute, his former passengers, were preparing to renew their experiments with the *Go-ahead*, he had made his way to the United States, and at the appointed hour, on the appointed day, he was there.

Does the gigantic bird of prey then mean to swoop upon the *Go-ahead?* While taking his revenge, does this Robur mean simultaneously to demonstrate publicly the superiority of the airship over the balloon and all other machines that are lighter than air?

Within their car Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans took stock of the danger that threatened them, of the fate which awaited them. Flight was necessary, not horizontally, when the *Go-ahead* would easily be outstripped, but upwards to the highest heights, where there might be a chance perhaps of escaping the terrible adversary.

So the *Go-ahead* rose to a height of something like five thousand metres, and according

to the newspaper accounts, of which I still have an exact recollection, the *Albatross* followed it up in its upward movement, manœuvred round its sides, and flew around it in ever lessening circles. Was its intention to rend the fragile envelope with one spring?

The *Go-ahead*, relieving itself of some of its ballast, rose ten thousand metres higher still. The *Albatross*, its screws rotating at their maximum speed, followed it even there.

Suddenly there was an explosion. The envelope of the balloon had just ripped under the pressure of the gas, which dilated beyond all limits at this altitude, and, half deflated, it was falling rapidly.

And then the *Albatross* darted towards it, not to finish it off, but to bring it help. Yes! Robur, forgetting his vengeance, overtook the *Go-ahead* and its men, and lifting out Uncle Prudent, Phil Evans and the aeronaut, helped them on to the platform of the airship. Then the balloon, almost entirely empty now, fell again, a huge unwieldy rag, upon the trees in Fairmount Park.

The crowd was breathless with excitement and with fright.

And now that the president and secretary of the Weldon Institute were prisoners once more in the hands of Robur, what would

happen? Would Robur bear them off with him through space, and this time for ever?

The question was settled almost at once. After having remained stationary for a few minutes at a height of five or six hundred metres, the *Albatross* began to come down, as if to come to ground on the open space in Fairmount Park. But if it came within reach, would the maddened crowd have sufficient self-control to restrain itself from falling upon the airship, and would it let slip this opportunity of securing the person of Robur the Conqueror?

The *Albatross* still came down, and when it was only five or six feet above the ground with its suspensory screws still working, it stopped.

There was a general rush towards the open space.

Then Robur's voice was heard, and this is the literal text of what he said:

"Citizens of the United States, the president and the secretary of the Weldon Institute are once more in my power. If I kept them I should only be using my just right of revenge. But from the excitement which the triumphs of the *Albatross* have awakened, I perceive that the minds of men are not ready yet for

the important revolution which the conquest of the air must bring some day! Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans, you are free."

The president and the secretary of the Weldon Institute, and the aeronaut Tynder, leaped to the ground in an instant, and the airship rose some thirty feet or so above the earth, out of the reach of harm.

Robur continued as follows:

"Citizens of the United States, I have made my experiment, but it must bide its time. It is still too soon to get the mastery over contradictory and divided interests. So I go away, and I take my secret with me. It will not be lost to humanity, and it will become the property of humanity when humanity shall have learnt enough never to make misuse of it. Farewell, Citizens of the United States!"

Then the *Albatross*, borne by its screws and driven by its propellers, disappeared in the direction of the east amid the loud hurrahs of the crowd.

I have been particular to report this last scene in detail, because it reveals the mental state of this strange individual. It seems that he was not animated at that time by any hostility towards humanity. He was content to reserve the future. But his

attitude most assuredly disclosed the immovable confidence he had in his own genius, and the tremendous pride engendered in him by his super-human power.

There is nothing surprising then in the fact that his ideas had gradually become so exaggerated that he claimed to have subjugated the entire world, as was proved by his last letter and by his highly significant threats. Was it therefore necessary to conclude that as time went by his mental excitement had grown in an alarming degree, and that there was danger now of its carrying him into the worst excesses?

As to what had happened since the departure of the *Albatross*, what I knew now enabled me to reconstruct it easily. This marvellous inventor had not been satisfied with creating a flying machine, perfect as that was. The idea had come to him of constructing a machine able to move on land, on water, under water, and through space. And probably in the workshops in the Island of X, a chosen staff that kept the secret succeeded in the complete construction of the machine that had this triple power of transformation. Then the *Albatross* was destroyed, almost certainly in the enclosure of the Great Eyry, inaccessible to all others.

Then the *Terrible* made her appearance on the roads of the United States, in the neighbouring seas, and in the aerial regions of America. And I have told how, after having been pursued vainly over the surface of Lake Erie, she escaped through the air while I was a prisoner on board!

XVII

IN THE NAME OF THE LAW

WHAT would be the issue of the adventure in which I was engaged? Could I do anything to produce its conclusion, soon or late? Did it not lie in the hands of Robur alone? In all probability I should never have the chance of making my escape, as Uncle Prudent and Phil Evnas had done on Chatham Island. I must wait, and wait how long?

In any case, if my curiosity had been partly satisfied, it was only in respect of the Great Eyry mystery. After having visited this enclosure I knew the cause of the phenomena which had been observed in this region of the Blue Ridge. I knew for certain that neither the country people in this district of North Carolina nor the inhabitants of Pleasant Garden and Morganton were threatened by any eruption or earthquake. There was no volcanic force at work in the bowels of the earth. No crater yawned in this corner of the Alleghenies. The Great Eyry was merely Robur the Conqueror's retreat. He had discovered this inaccessible aerie, where

he stored his materials and his provisions, by chance, no doubt, during the course of one of his aerial voyages, a retreat that was very likely safer than his island of X in the Pacific Ocean.

Quite so, but if I had learned this secret of the marvellous locomotive machine and its various modes of operation, what did I know after all? Granting that its multiple mechanism was worked by electricity, and that it drew its electricity, as the *Albatross* did, by some new process from the surrounding air, how was the mechanism planned? I had not been allowed to see anything of it, and I should not be allowed.

With regard to the question of my liberty, and whether it would be restored to me some day, I said to myself:

"Robur most certainly intends to remain unknown. As for the use he means to make of his machine, I am afraid, when I remember his threats, that we must expect more harm than good! Anyhow, he will doubtless want to keep in the future the incognito he has maintained in the past! Now, only one man is able to establish the identity of the Master of the World with that of Robur the Conqueror: that man is myself, his prisoner; myself, who have the right to arrest him,

ay, and the plain duty to lay my hand on his shoulder in the name of the law!"

On the other hand, what expectation was there of help from outside? Manifestly, none. The authorities knew by this time all that had happened at Black Rock. My two policemen, John Hart and Nab Walker, must have returned to Washington with Wells. Mr. Ward, apprised of everything, could not remain under any illusion about my fate, and the question could be stated in these terms:

Either I had been drowned in the waters of Lake Erie when the *Terrible* left the creek, dragging me at the end of the hawser; or I had been pulled on board the *Terrible* and was now in her captain's hands.

In the first case there was nothing to do but resign oneself to the loss of John Strock, chief inspector of police at Washington.

In the second, what hope was there of ever seeing him again?

As I have narrated, during the remainder of the night and the next day, the *Terrible* sailed on the surface of Lake Erie. About four o'clock, near Buffalo, two destroyers gave chase to her, and partly by outstripping them in speed, and partly by diving, she finally escaped them. They followed her

up between the banks of the Niagara, and stopped only when the current threatened to drag them down to the falls. Day was closing in, and what could they have thought aboard the destroyers, except that the *Terrible* had been engulfed in the bottom of the cataract's abysses? Besides, as night had come, everything favoured the supposition that the flying machine had not been seen, either when she rose above the Horse-shoe Fall, or during the course of her aerial journey to the Great Eyry.

With respect to myself, should I make up my mind to question Robur? Would he consent to so much as seem to hear me? Might he not think it enough to have flung his name to me, and deem that name an answer to everything?

The day passed without bringing the least change in the situation. Robur and his men were actively busy over the machine, whose engines required various repairs. I gathered from this that it would not be long before he set out once more, and that I should be of the party. Of course, they might have left me at the bottom of this enclosure, from which I could not possibly have escaped, and where material existence would have been assured to me for many a long day.

What thoughts passed through his ever-boiling brain? What plans was he forming for the future? Towards what region would he make his way? Did he intend to put in execution the threats that he had held out in his letter—the threats of a madman, beyond all question?

During the night which followed this first day I slept on a litter of dry grass in one of the grottoes of the Great Eyry, where food was placed at my disposal. On the 2nd and 3rd of August the repairs went on, and Robur and his companions were so busy over their work that they hardly exchanged a word. They occupied themselves also in laying in fresh stores, possibly with a view to a long absence. And who could tell if the *Terrible* was not about to venture across vast distances, if her captain had not perhaps the intention to return to that Island of X in the middle of the Pacific Ocean? Might not his tremendous pride lead him on to madness—madness which his companions, every whit as extravagant as he, might not be able to control? Into what impossible adventures might they not allow themselves to be dragged? Might he not deem himself mightier than the elements which he had braved so audaciously already, when he had only an airship at his disposal?

Now, earth, sea, and heaven offered to him an absolutely unlimited field, where he was beyond pursuit!

I had every reason, then, to fear the future. As for escaping from the Great Eyry before being entrapped into a new voyage, that was out of the question! Then, how was I to escape when the *Terrible* was in full flight or in full sail, unless perhaps she were travelling by road, and at a moderate pace? That, you will agree, was a poor hope!

As I have said, I had tried since my arrival at the Great Eyry to get some answer from Robur about what was to happen to me, but in vain. This day I made a fresh attempt.

In the afternoon I was walking to and fro before the main grotto in the enclosure. Robur, standing at the entrance to it, followed me with his eyes. Had he any intention of speaking to me?

I went up to him.

"Captain," I said, "I have already asked you a question, to which you have not chosen to reply. I repeat it: what are you going to do with me?"

We were standing face to face, a couple of paces apart. With arms folded, he looked at me, and I was scared by his look. "Scared" is the word! It was not the look of a man in

full possession of his reason, but rather of one who had nothing of the human left in him!

I repeated my question in a more imperative tone. Just for one moment I thought that Robur was going to cease standing mute.

"What are you going to do with me? Will you restore me to liberty?"

Without replying to me, without even having seemed to hear me, Robur went back into the grotto, where Turner joined him.

How long would this visit of the *Terrible* to the Great Eyry last, or rather this call at port? I did not know. I observed, however, that on the afternoon of this 3rd of August all the work of repairs and cleaning up was finished. The store-rooms in the machine were re-filled with provisions stocked within the enclosure. Then Turner and his mate brought to the middle of the amphitheatre all that remained of the material, empty chests, scraps of frame-work, bits of wood, belonging, no doubt, to the old *Albatross*, which was sacrificed to the new engine of locomotion. Under this great heap was spread a thick bed of dry grass. The idea then came to me that Robur was preparing to leave this retreat without any intention of returning to it.

And, in point of fact, he was not unaware that public attention had been drawn to the Great Eyry, and that an attempt had been made to gain entrance into it. Had he not reason to fear that the attempt would be renewed some day or other, and with more success, that in the end his retreat would be invaded, and he did not want a single trace of his occupation to be found?

The sun had disappeared beyond the summits of the Blue Ridge. Only the Black Dome, which pointed to the north-east, was still afire with its rays. Probably the *Terrible* would wait until it was dark before taking to flight again. No one knew that she had power to change herself from automobile or boat into a flying machine. Never as yet had she been observed when travelling through the air. And might it not be only on the day when the Master of the World chose to put his mad menaces into effect that she would show herself in this fourth metamorphosis?

About nine o'clock the enclosure was wrapped in dense darkness. Not a star was visible in the sky, which was obscured by heavy clouds just driven up by an easterly breeze. The flight of the *Terrible* would not be visible, either above American territory or over the adjacent seas

At this moment Turner approached the pile built in the centre of the amphitheatre and set light to the bed of grass.

In a minute the whole thing flared up. From the midst of a dense smoke, brilliant tongues of flame leaped up far above the walls of the Great Eyry. Once more the inhabitants of Morganton and of Pleasant Garden had grounds for thinking that the crater had reopened and that these flames foreshadowed some eruption!

I watched the fire and listened to the crackling noise which rent the air. Erect upon the deck of the *Terrible*, Robur watched it too. Turner and his mate kept pushing back into the furnace all the fragments that the fierceness of the fire threw out on to the ground.

Then gradually the flames died away. There was nothing left but a red glow smothered under heaps of ashes, and silence fell again upon the black night.

Suddenly I felt myself seized by the arm. Turner dragged me towards the machine. Resistance would have been useless, and besides, anything would be better than to be left without resources in this enclosure!

Directly I had set foot on the deck Turner and his mate came on board, the latter taking

up his post forward, while the former went into the engine-room, which was lighted by electric bulbs, none of whose light filtered through to the outside.

Robur himself stood aft, with the regulator in reach of his hand, in order to govern both speed and direction.

As for me, I was obliged to go down into my cabin, the hatch over which was closed.

During that night, as on the occasion of our leaving Niagara Falls, I was not to be permitted to observe the evolutions of the *Terrible*.

However, if I could see nothing of what went on on board, I could at least hear the sound of the engine. I even felt the sensation when the machine, slowly raised into the air, lost touch with the ground. There was a certain swaying motion; then the lower turbines gained a tremendous speed, while the great wings flapped with perfect regularity.

So the *Terrible* had left the Great Eyry, probably for ever, and had taken to the air again, as is said of a ship that takes to the water. The flying machine was soaring above the double chain of the Alleghenies, and no doubt it would only leave the high belts of the atmosphere when it had passed

the high mountain relief of this portion of the country.

Several hours went by, and oh, how long they seemed to me! I made no attempt to forget them in sleep. A welter of thoughts, incoherent for the most part, beset my mind. I felt myself rapt away through the impossible. as I was being rapt away through space by an aerial monster! With all the speed at its command, where might it not go during this interminable night? I recalled in memory the most improbable voyage of the *Albatross*, the story of which had been published by the Weldon Institute, as told by Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans. What Robur the Conqueror had done with his airship he could do with this flying machine, and in even easier conditions, since he was at once master of the land, the sea, and the air!

At last the first rays of the sun illumined my cabin. Should I be allowed to leave it, to resume my place on deck, as I had been able to do when on Lake Erie?

I pushed the hatch; it opened.

I stepped up, waist high. All round the *Terrible* was a waste of sea as far as the horizon. She was flying above an ocean, at a height which I estimated to be between a thousand and twelve hundred feet.

I did not see Robur, who was busy in the engine-room.

Turner was at the wheel, his mate forward.

As soon as I got on deck I saw what I had not been able to see during our nocturnal flight between Niagara Falls and the Great Eyry, the movement of the powerful wings which flapped to port and starboard, while at the same time the turbines screwed in the air under the sides of the flying machine.

From the position of the sun, which was a few degrees above the horizon, I perceived that we were travelling southwards. Consequently, unless, of course, the course had been changed after the *Terrible* had cleared the walls of the enclosure, it was the Gulf of Mexico which lay below us.

Masses of livid clouds, which rose out of the west, portended a sultry day. These signs of an approaching storm were not lost upon Robur when, about eight o'clock, he came on deck and relieved Turner. Did he perhaps remember the whirlwind in which the *Albatross* had so nearly been lost, and that terrible cyclone from which he emerged only by a miracle when above the Antarctic Sea?

It is true that what an airship could not have done a flying machine could do in similar cases. It might leave the high altitudes

where the elements were warring together and come down to the surface of the sea, and if the waves there ran too riotously high it could seek and find complete calm within its tranquil depths.

Besides, Robur, who undoubtedly was "weather-wise," calculated from several indications that the storm would not break that day. So he continued his flight, and when, in the afternoon, he took to the water again, it was not through any fear of bad weather. The *Terrible* is a marine bird, a frigate bird or a halcyon, which can rest upon the water, with the important difference, that fatigue has no power over its metallic organs, which are worked by inexhaustible electricity.

For the rest, this vast extent of water was absolutely deserted. There was not a sail nor a trail of smoke even in the farthest limits of the horizon. The passage of the flying machine through the layers of the air could not, therefore, have been observed.

The afternoon was not marked by any incident. The *Terrible* was travelling only at half speed. What the intentions of her captain were I could not conceive. If he followed the present course he would come to one or other of the Great Antilles, and then, at the end of the gulf, to the coast of

Venezuela or Colombia. But perhaps when the next night came the aviator would take to the air again in order to cross the long isthmus of Guatemala and Nicaragua, and so get to the Island of X in the waters of the Pacific?

When evening fell the sun set in a horizon red as blood. The sea sparkled all around the *Terrible*, which seemed to raise a flashing fire-flight as she moved. What sailors call dirty weather must be expected.

That, no doubt, was Robur's opinion. Instead of remaining on deck I was obliged to go down into my cabin, and the hatchway was closed upon me.

A few minutes later, from the sounds which I heard on board, I learnt that the machine was going to be submerged. And five minutes later still it was travelling quietly through the deeps.

Feeling very dejected, through fatigue as much as anxiety, I fell into a deep sleep, a natural one this time, not induced by any sleeping draught.

When I woke up—I do not the least know how many hours later—the *Terrible* was still below the surface of the water.

But it was not long before she rose. Daylight came through my port-holes, and

simultaneously the boat began to roll and pitch in the rather heavy sea.

I was able to resume my post near the hatchway, and I directed my first glance towards the horizon.

A storm was coming up from the north-west, with heavy clouds, between which bright flashes of lightning glanced. Thunder was rolling already, its roar reverberated far and wide by the echoes of space.

I was surprised—more than surprised, I was frightened—by the rapidity with which the storm swept up towards the zenith. A ship would hardly have had time to take in sail to meet it, so swift and violent was its onslaught.

Suddenly the wind broke loose with incredible force, as if it had rent the barriers of vapour. In a moment an appalling sea got up. Wild, streaming waves, their long rollers one mass of foam, completely covered the *Terrible*. If I had not hung on tight to the handrail I should have been swept overboard.

There was only one thing to do: transform the machine into a submarine. Ten feet below the surface of the water it would be in peace and safety. Longer to brave the fury of this disordered sea meant destruction.

Robur remained on deck, where I awaited the order to go back to my cabin. The order was not given. No preparations were made even for submersion.

With eyes more brilliant than ever, and quite impassive before this storm, the captain looked it squarely in the face as if defying it, knowing that he had nothing to fear from it. Yet it was absolutely necessary that the *Terrible* should dive without losing a minute, and Robur did not seem to have made up his mind to do so.

No! he preserved his haughty attitude, like a man who, in his intractable pride, believed himself above and beyond mankind! Seeing him like that I wondered, with alarm, if the man were not some fantastic being, escaped from the supernatural world!

Then these words broke from his lips, heard clearly in the midst of the whistling of the tempest and the rattling of the thunder:

"I—Robur—Robur—Master of the World!"

He made a sign, understood by Turner and his mate. It was an order, and without hesitation these unhappy men, as mad as their captain, executed it.

With its great wings unfolded the flying machine rose as it had risen above the Falls of Niagara. But while on that occasion

it had escaped the vortex of the cataract, this time it was through the vortex of the storm that it winged its mad flight.

It flew amidst a thousand lightning flashes, amid the crashing thunder, in a sky that was all aflame! It flew through all this blinding glare, at imminent risk of being struck by lightning!

Robur had not altered his demeanour one whit. With the wheel in one hand, the hand gear of the regulator in the other, with the great wings beating fit to break, he drove the machine into the thickest of the storm, where the electric discharges flashed most fiercely from one cloud to another.

The madman ought to have been rushed upon, and prevented forcibly from driving his flying machine into the heart of this furnace! He ought to have been compelled to descend and seek beneath the water the safety which was no longer to be found either upon the surface of the sea or in the upper zones of the atmosphere! There he might have awaited in perfect security the finish of this frightful warfare of the elements!

Then all my instincts and all my passionate zeal for duty rose to a frenzy in me! Yes! it was pure madness, not to arrest this criminal whom my country had set beyond

the law, who was a menace to the entire world with his terrible invention, not to seize him by the collar and hand him over to justice! Was I or was I not John Strock, chief inspector of police? And forgetting where I was, one against three, above a raging ocean, I leaped towards the after-deck and flung myself on Robur, shouting in a voice which rose above the clamour of the storm:

"In the name of the law I——"

Suddenly, the *Terrible* trembled as if she had been struck by a violent electric shock. Her whole frame shivered, as the human frame shivers under the discharge of electricity. The machine, struck in the very middle of her iron casing, was utterly put out of joint.

The *Terrible* had been struck by lightning, stroke upon stroke, and with wings broken and crumpled, and turbines smashed, she fell from a height of more than a thousand feet into the depths of the gulf below!

XVIII

OLD GRAD HAS THE LAST WORD

When I came to myself, after having been unconscious for I cannot say how many hours, a group of sailors, whose care had brought me back to life, surrounded the bunk where I had been laid.

An officer standing by my bedside questioned me, and when my memory was restored I was able to reply to his questions.

I told him everything, yes, everything, and those who heard me must surely have thought that they had to deal with an unhappy being, whose reason had not returned with his life!

I was on board the steamer *Ottawa*, on her way through the Gulf of Mexico and bound for New Orleans. While she was running before the storm the ship had fallen in with the wreckage to which I was clinging and had picked me up.

I was saved, but Robur the Conqueror and his two companions had ended their adventurous career in the waters of the gulf. The Master of the World had vanished for ever, struck by the thunderbolt that he had dared

to brave in open space, carrying with him into annihilation the secret of his marvellous machine.

Five days later the *Ottawa* came in sight of the coast of Louisiana, and on the morning of August 10th she anchored in the harbour.

After having taken leave of the officers of the steamer, I boarded a train that was just starting for Washington, my native town, which more than once I had despaired of ever seeing again.

First of all I went to the police headquarters, wishing that my first visit should be paid to Mr. Ward.

The surprise, the stupefaction, and the delight as well, of my chief when the door was opened to admit me! Had he not every reason to suppose from my companion's report, that I had perished in Lake Erie?

I acquainted him with everything that had happened since my disappearance—the chase by the destroyers over the lake, the flight of the *Terrible* over the Niagara Falls, the stay within the enclosure of the Great Eyry, and the catastrophe during the storm over the Gulf of Mexico. It was then that he learnt for the first time that the machine created by the genius of this man, Robur, was able to

move through space as it did on land and sea.

And, really and truly, did not the possession of such a machine justify the title "Master of the World," which its creator had assumed? What is absolutely certain is that the public safety would have been endangered permanently, for it would always have lacked means of protection.

But the pride that I had seen growing gradually in this amazing man had driven him to match himself against the most terrible of the elements, in mid air, and it was a miracle that I had emerged safe and sound from that appalling catastrophe.

Mr. Ward was hard put to it to believe my story.

"Well, my dear Strock," he said, "you are back again and that is the main thing! After this famous Robur you are the man of the moment! I hope that the position will not make you lose your head, through vanity, as it did this madman of an inventor."

"No, sir," I replied. "But you will admit that no inquisitive man, who has been to satisfy his curiosity, was ever put to such a test."

"I agree, Strock! Well, you have discovered the mysteries of the Great Eyry,

and the metamorphoses of the *Terrible!* Unfortunately the secrets of the Master of the World have died with him!"

That same evening the American newspapers published the story of my adventures, the truth of which could not be challenged, and, as Mr. Ward had said, I was the man of the moment.

One of them said:

"Thanks to Inspector Strock, America still holds the record for police. While elsewhere they work with more or less success on land and sea, the American police have started to pursue criminals in the bottom of lakes and oceans, and even through space!"

In acting in the way I have narrated, have I done anything that will not perhaps be the ordinary duty of our colleagues at the end of this century?

You can imagine, too, the reception I got from my old servant when I returned to my house in Long Street. On my apparition—and is not that the proper word?—I really thought the dear old lady would die! Then after listening to me, with her eyes wet with tears. she thanked Providence for having saved me from so many perils.

"Well, sir," she said, "well—was I wrong?"

"Wrong, my dear Grad? How?"

"In making out that the Great Eyry was a retreat for the devil?"

"But Robur was not the devil——"

"Well," said old Grad, "he very well might have been!"

THE END